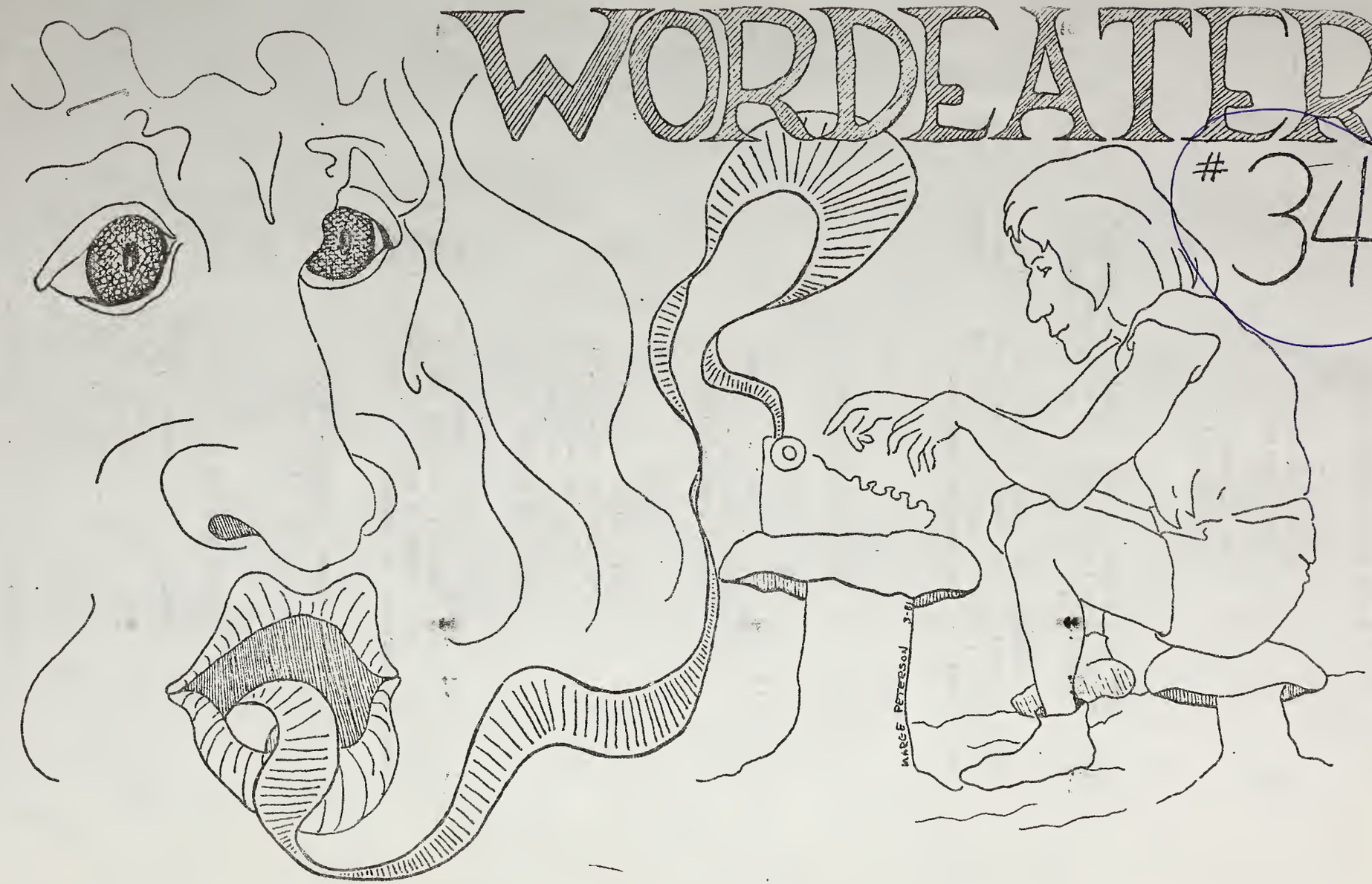
WORDEATER

#34



Should be #35

WORDEATER XXXV STAFF:

Judy Belfield
Kristi Carston
Beth Hawkins
Dave Moore
Deb Wiggins
John Stobart

For this issue, to get a submission accepted, three of the above had to vote for acceptance. For the award winners, only John Stobart is responsible.

Manuscripts or cover designs for Wordeater Number 37 must be submitted to John Stobart in room C 1069 by October 5, 1981. Manuscripts will not be returned. They may be anonymous and should be typed.

WORDEATER WINNERS:

Poetry

Judy Belfield - $10.00
Sharon Odehnal - $5.00
Dave Moore - $5.00

Prose

Dave Moore - $10.00
Chris Englehardt - $5.00
J. D. Guse - $5.00
Irma Kump - $5.00
Marge Peterson - $5.00

Ordinarily, WORDEATER awards are not so numerous for one issue. However, in John Stobart's opinion, WORDEATER would be remiss by not rewarding all of the above for serious and productive effort this year.

Cover designs - $20.00
Marge Peterson

Deadlines for next year:

WORDEATER 37 - October 5, 1981
38 - November 23, 1981
39 - February 26, 1981
40 - April 30, 1981

Thanks to all who helped collate.

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J. D. Guse

WATCHING TIPARILLO BREATH

Watching Tiparillo breath
waltz across the room
in her suede boots.
Glasses leave circular imprints
on hair that "Must have taken hours, my love."
Of course she dresses that way
so as not to excite the audience.
Fat chance, chick,
I'm pissed!
You're a model for all the girls to gawk at.
Your home video recorder
must carry only Wella Balsam commercials.
Don't lie to me;
I know your kind.
Pompous
Biased
Profusely unoriginal.
I think I hear your mother calling.
Why don't you go home now.

******

J. D. Guse

TWO TWO-LINERS

You can always tell a generous man
by the size of the joints he rolls.

****

My ability to fuck up is only outdone by
my inability to describe why.

******

David Moore

ITS VOICE BOOMING OUT

Its voice booming out
like a big bass drum
Going to a land
Where there aint no gum
Cross that crystal void
To a place I don't know.
Where the suns always shine
And the moons all roll

The Brain's in a bowl
Shove it down the hole
Down and down and down
We go
Take it slow

Downstairs in the Kremlin
They shuffle softly
Creeping toward that
Red button
Under Baron Zemo's console

We're all parodies
In a copper sea

******

David Moore

(In Central Africa, tales are told of a mythical creature called the Lau. Some people claim to have seen it. And some bold individuals claim it is related to the Loch Ness Monster. Here is something made up by me for no obvious reason.)

WHAT COLOR ARE A LAU'S EYES?

The concept of a lau
Stalking softly by
Pitter patter pitter patter
Watching the Ra expeditions sailing away
Is Jesus the Son of God?
BROWN (Seek not hidden meanings)

Tricked by a signal light
Ha ha ha
It's really weird
To be incomplete
So look to those Ra expeditions
Or go hunt the Lau
It's futile but fun
A
Meandering
Clever
Devious
Way of doing things

******

David Moore

JUST A BOY AND HIS GOD

(SUPERIOR BEING STORY # ONE)

"I'm really worried 'bout my boy, Reverend," said Carl Jackson. "I don't think Aleister believes in God anymore. In fact, he may have been taken over by Satan hisself!"

Rev. George Porter just barely suppressed a smile. He disliked Jackson, and this situation didn't alter that. Jackson was just one of those fat hicks who wore a baseball cap, drank large amounts of beer, and had trouble deciding between watching football and going to church. Besides, the Jackson home was so small and shabby, the family being lower class. Porter never would have come if the Jacksons hadn't literally begged him to.

Realizing that Jackson was awaiting a reply, Porter cleared his throat and answered. "Come now Carl. Surely you don't think Aleister's soul has been stolen? You know how small boys are. When he grows up, he'll come safely back into the fold."

"But you don't know what's been going on around here, Rev. All the kid can talk about is bein' in contact with some ancient god called Marduk, or somethin' like that. He says that this here Marduk talks to him, and I hear weird noises at night. It's gotta be a devil, like in that one movie they had out."

Porter wanted to suggest that Jackson get mental help, but that would hardly be proper. "Demonic possession? Carl, that's a Catholic gimmick, and even they don't believe in it anymore. Just forget all of this."

"Just see him for yourself, Reverend Porter. I'll call him. Al! Al, get your butt in here. Now, boy!"

Both men gazed toward the boy's room, but the door didn't open. Jackson grew red with anger and was about to utter a choice word, but then he remembered who his guest was. So he called his wife. "Martha! Go get that son of yours outta his room."

Martha Jackson came out of the kitchen with a scowl on her face. She'd been preparing a cup of coffee and a donut for Porter and felt slightly humiliated, being bossed around in front of him. Every time Carl wasn't sure about what to do with Aleister, he dumped the whole mess into her lap.

She went to the boy's room and knocked on the door. "Al, come on out here now. You hear me?"

A few moments later, the door opened and Aleister Jackson came out. He smiled at his mother. "Is Mr. Porter here yet? Marduk told me that you guys called him."

Mrs. Jackson had some trouble hiding her disgust. "That's Reverend Porter,

(continued)

honey. You must show some respect." She remained calm though. Unlike her husband, she had checked up on this Marduk her son claimed to talk with. It wasn't a demon, just some pagan god worshipped by an ancient, good-for-nothing, heathen civilization.

Al strolled into the living room and faced the two men. He looked right at them with a confident but not quite defiant expression.

Porter forced a smile and patted Al on the head. "He sure has grown, hasn't he?" he said to nobody in particular. "Now then, Aleister, your daddy has been telling me that you're bowing to a false god. Is that true?"

"No sir, I've been worshipping Lord Marduk," replied Aleister, doing his best to sound respectful.

"Told ya so, didn't I, Rev?" Jackson said glumly. Maybe now Porter would believe him.

The Reverend kept his poise. "Now, how could a fine Christian lad such as yourself pay homage to some old idol called Marsduck?"

Al frowned. The Reverend was obviously a close-minded fool. But he managed to keep a civil tongue. "I'm no longer a Christian, sir. Please let me..."

"Now, now Aleister," interrupted Porter. "You know in your heart of hearts that..."

"Just let me tell you why..."

"It's not polite to interrupt me, boy," snorted Porter.

Carl Jackson, who'd been patient so far, finally decided to enter the conversation. "Just listen to him, Reverend. You won't believe your ears."

Mrs. Jackson stood next to the television set. She sadly nodded in agreement with her husband. Porter relented and relaxed in his chair. They all stared at Al.

The kid was embarassed by all the attention he was getting. He always felt strange when he was the center of whatever was going on. But he managed to tell his story without too much trouble.

ALEISTER'S STORY

Well, you know, I always went to church with mom and dad an' all that. I always prayed at night and did all the stuff I was supposed to, ya know. I read them picture Bibles and everything.

Then, one day, Billy Johnson beat me up for no reason at all. I didn't even do nothing to him, or call him names, or anything! But he creamed me anyway.

Dad told me I had to learn how ta fight back and be real tough and all that. But I remembered how you says people should turn the other cheek and forgive people.

I didn't understand any of it, so I prayed to God 'n Jesus to explain it to me. Every night, I begged for them to help me figure it out, but they never answered me, no matter how hard I prayed.

So, I asked all my friends and relatives why God didn't answer, and they all said that He never talked to people anymore. But they didn't know why.

Then one day I saw this one TV show on that one educational channel. It talke about these ancient people called Babylonians and how they prayed to Marduk.

So for the heck of it, ya know, I prayed to Marduk. And he answered me! He told me all sorts of neat stuff. He even made me strong so I could beat up Billy Johnson real easy. And I did too, I whipped him at school like he was a little girl.

Now I talk to Marduk all the time. I even invited him to come here and really see me.

Al finished his story and sat down on the floor. His parents waited intently for Porter's reaction.

The Reverend felt like telling them to take the kid to a psychologist. But he decided it would be best to convince the kid that his mind was playing tricks on him. "Is...er...Marduk coming?"

"Yessir, he said he was."

"When? During the end of the world?"

"Nosir. He said he'd be here this afternoon."

Porter grinned. "I have things I should be doing, Carl. But if you let me stay for supper, I'll stick this out. When Marduk fails to show up, maybe your problem will be over."

"Sure thing Rev," agreed Carl. "We can watch some football. Martha, get me and the Rev some Fritos, will ya?"

Mrs. Jackson went to do as she was told. Her husband turned on the Alabama game, and he and the Reverend pretended to relax. Aleister kept glancing out the window. It was going to be a long afternoon.

By halftime, the Crimson Tide had a rather large lead. Carl Jackson was trying to divide his attention between the cheerleaders and the scores of other games. Suddenly, an icy chill crept up his spine. He knew his son was either lying or flipped, but he still had an uneasy feeling about being told a god was going to visit him. Besides, despite what Porter had said, he feared that Satan was involved.

The Reverend hardly said a word, save to comment that God certainly had blessed Bear Bryant. Jackson could tell that the man was bored. As for Al, he had fallen asleep after the last touchdown. He had a slightly anxious smile on his face. Martha was in the kitchen doing something. Jackson didn't really care what, as long as she remembered to fill the Frito bowl and bring him Cokes. He usually drank

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beer, but with the Reverend sitting right there...

Then the doorbell rang. Jackson jumped up in surprise, slopping Coke in his lap. He decided to let his wife answer it. Aleister sat up and gazed expectantly at the door. Porter yawned.

It was just Mrs. Bryson from across the street. She wanted to know if Martha wanted to go shopping and escape the football game for awhile. Martha declined, giving Mrs. Bryson a polite brush off. The Jacksons were expecting company. Maybe.

During the third quarter, the phone rang. Once again, Jackson let his wife take care of it, even though he was closer to the phone. Martha put the receiver to her ear and said, "Hello, Jackson residence." She promptly slammed it down when all she heard was heavy breathing. But she did feel some relief, at least it wasn't someone claiming to be a pagan God.

Halfway into the fourth quarter, Jackson was beginning to laugh at himself. Imagine being afraid that some demon was going to ring his doorbell. He sighed and glanced at Porter; the preacher was asleep. Martha was in the kitchen starting supper, and Al was intent on the study of the wishbone formation. So, when somebody knocked on the door, his stomach churned slightly, but he knew it would just be one of the stupid neighbors.

Al glanced out the window to see who it was. He didn't seem too impressed, so Carl happily announced that he would get the door. Nobody seemed to be terribly thrilled by his courage.

Jackson opened his door. The visitor was just an ordinary man dressed in a suit and wearing a hat not unlike the one worn by Bear Bryant. Probably some idiot salesman ready to shovel the bull.

Carl pushed the screen door open slightly. "Yeah, whatcha want?"

The man took off his hat. "I'm here to see Mr. Aleister Jackson. My name is Marduk."

Jackson almost stumbled as he backed away from the doorway. Al was wide-eyed and speechless.

It was Porter who took control. "So you're Marduk, huh?" he asked, as he held the door for the man.

"Yes, I am."

Porter nodded. "Sure, sure. It's obvious Carl. This guy's a lunatic, and he's somehow conned your son. Don't ask me why."

Marduk strolled into the living room and sat in the chair Porter had vacated. Al bowed before him and sat down on the floor. Carl and Martha stared helplessly at each other. Porter assumed the attitude of a prosecutor.

"Okay Marduk, if you are a god, how come we haven't heard from you for a long time? Answer that, your highness!"

Marduk looked at him with an air of slight amusement. "Very well."

MARDUK'S STORY

The great cities of those who worshipped me and called upon my powers decayed and crumbled. I became nothing but a half-remembered myth. So I slept. Since mankind had forgotten me, I would forget mankind.

For centuries I slept. And when I finally awoke, many things had changed. My brothers and sisters had passed from the earth to unknown regions.

So I walked the lands as a human bein and I saw many things. The science of man had progressed far faster than I had expected. I thought that your race had ou grown the need for gods.

Then I asked many people about the gods they followed. Some of them knew of only one god; some knew of quite a large numbe.

So I ascended the mountains that touc the sky and demanded audience with the ne generation of gods. I tried to summon th but none of them paid me any heed. I rag and fumed at their arrogance, and I swore I would find them and topple them in cosmic battle. After all, they are my heirs and I am their ancestor.

I sat upon my mountain and contemplat Finally, I passed into the Afterlife in order to question the spirits. There I was greeted by the nameless being who ha the task of judging the dead. It was friendly, but was being forced to delive an ultimatum by others it could not name

Marduk, your time has gone
No one seriously worships you
Your followers are dust.
Live as a man
Or depart the mortal realm
Forever.

I returned to normal reality, my hop crushed. Was there no place for me in this new era? Then I heard Aleister's summons, and I eagerly sent part of my being to aid him. When you began to tro ble him, he asked me to come here and prove my presence.

Thus I am here, and I am willing to prov myself to you. Ready?

Porter giggled. "Okay, prove yourself. Show us your godhood."

Marduk reclined in his chair, seemi to relax. For a moment nothing seemed to happen. Then the couch suddenly burs into flames but was not consumed. A my ious voice boomed out of nowhere, speaking a language none of the humans could understand. Various objects in the hou were levitated, including Martha Jacks

Finally, the couch went out, the my ic fires leaving not a scorch. The voi fell silent. And after randomly floating around the house, the ob jects and Mrs. Jackson returned to thei original positions.

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"Well, what do you think?" Marduk asked politely.

The Jacksons were suitably awed, but Porter was totally horrified. He screamed "Satan! You must be Satan himself! Worker of false miracles!"

He desperately groped into his pocket and produced a cross. He held it out and tried to perform an exorcism as best he could. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit I command you to begone!"

Marduk only smiled.

"Begone!" Porter shrieked. His face was scarlet and his eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets.

Marduk snatched the cross from Porter's grasp and casually examined it. "Nice little trinket you have here."

Porter could only mumble, "Surely the Prince of Evil couldn't touch the symbol of our Lord and Saviour. You aren't Satan or a demon... "

Marduk tossed the cross back to the Reverend. Porter instinctively caught it. He could only stare dumbly at it when he saw it had been transformed into gold. He looked back at Marduk and tried to say something, but no sound came from his mouth. Then he dropped the cross and ran out the door.

The god sighed as he picked up the cross. He looked at it solemnly; then he handed it to Mr. Jackson. Carl was afraid at first, but his face suddenly lit up and he took it from his visitor's hand with a mumbled, "Thank you."

The god spoke again. "The blessings of Marduk are upon you and your home. Now I must depart and resume my search for my fellow gods, but I shall leave a tiny portion of my spirit here to protect and aid you. Aleister, I would like to give you my humble thanks for giving me a chance. I would also like to present you with a gift."

A small crystal sphere materialized in the palm of his hand. It glowed ever so slightly. He gave the object to Aleister with the following words, "You are still too young to make use of this and command its powers. For now, it shall be your guardian. Some day you and some others will employ it for the good of your race. Goodbye, my friends."

Marduk vanished. Just completely vanished. The Jacksons stared at the spot he had left vacant. The football game on the television was over and the home team had won.

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David Moore

NAMELESS AS A STARLESS VOID

He looked deeply into the mirror and saw the cosmic juices flowing along the edges of a curved universe. Obviously, he had lost his mind. There was no way to deny what was happening. His sanity was slowly warping and twisting itself. He tottered on the verge of madness, soon to fall into an abyss of either divine ecstacy or hellish horror. It was really a pity. He had everything he could possibly want from life. Why was his sanity decaying? Oh well, nothing to do about it.

Suddenly Brian Montague began to perceive normal reality again. The mirror only reflected the image of his own disoriented features. Thank the gods he had snapped ou t of it. He was due to be out on stage in less than five minutes. As lead singer of the Fungal Warriors, he could hardly afford to be late. The Fungal Warriors, by the year of the Lord 1990, were the most popular group in the world. The bizarre lyrics of their songs the eerie echoes of their music, stroked and aroused and dug out the madness of a

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decadent society. Now that same madness had caught up with Brian. It had even inspired his latest song.

Time to go. He put on his crimson cape and blood-red top-hat. The hat was a cute piece of whimsey, with two little Satanic horns glued to the sides. He'd borrowed the idea from the deceased musician of an old group. So what if it was unoriginal! Few people remembered that far back anyway.

He rushed out of his dressing room, down a hall, and out onto the huge stage. He froze like a statue, letting the crowd scream its thunderous praise to the great hero of the age. Montague and his band took their places, surrounded by a blaze of multicolored lights.

"I'm glad you could come," Brian shouted into his microphone. The mega-decibel voice was almost neutralized by the shrieking, freaked-out crowd. "Yesss, you love us don't you?" The crowd seemed to mutate into a louder life-form. "We are almost gods! But we are also everything you were taught to deplore. We are false prophets and antichrists. Down with the establishment!" The audience would soon be hoarse. "Now, for our first little ditty. Really, it's quite harmless!" An icy smile graced Brian's lips as the psychotic tones drove the mob to heightened frenzy. Then he started to sing...

Where madness dwells
Dwell I
In ivory towers
And lofty rooms
In damp cellars
Where bells toll
For orange moths
Who devour flame
Fury of the beyond
Sweeps the empty plain
My life
My frreeeedom
My death
I sense something nameless
Stalking behind my back
And it is nameless
Nameless as a starless void.

During that evening's performance, Brian suffered another vision. The roaring crowd became a silent senate of demons. As the Fungal Warriors played, the crowd sat in judgment, snorting wisps of hell-fire. He ignored them and went on with the show. After awhile, the Council of Hell faded, the crowd and its nearly unbearable noise level returned.

At last it ended. The final show of another abominable world tour was over. Time for an exhausting series of wild parties, then home to work on a new album. Actually, Brian enjoyed the parties. They allowed him to indulge in the pleasures of the material world. And once again he would outwit the enemy.

"The enemy" consisted usually of undercover cops planted as party guests. They kept waiting for people to injest illegal chemicals. They often pulled in a gi big haul, but they never caught Brian. For despite the social pressure, Montague never took drugs.

The rest of the band put on their civilian garb and crept out the back way to their private limousines. But Brian walked proudly out the front door into the raving mob. For him it was the ultimate ego-trip. Hundreds of loyal fans struggling to touch his clothing, trying to rip away a souvenir. He was their messiah: the slightest touch of his cape was a spiritual experience for them. When he reached his limo, his costume would be in tatters, but he hovered at the heights of elation.

How could people say money wasn't everything? Brian couldn't understand it at all. Fame and fortune had given him everything he could possibly want. His fellow artists always seemed to think something was lacking in their lives of luxury and notoriety. They spent all their free time boozing, doping, looking for love, or dabbling in religion and mysticism. What fools! With Brian, money was everything, the gateway to all fulfillment.

His only problem was the insanity, and he would probably be able to deal with that. No matter when the distortions occurred, he had been able to pretend that nothing was terribly wrong. Even if "they" found out and had him put away, he'd get good care. He was rich and famous after all. Anyway, everybody had to have a few problems, and the madness had had some good effects. It had inspired a couple of hit songs.

Party. For Montague this meant an event that happened within a large mansion with what seemed like an infinite number of rooms. The denizens of this microcosm were many and varied. But due to their great and awesome numbers, they seemed to merge into one organism of dull sameness. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Brian," they would babble one by one. "I've heard so much about you, Mr. Montague," No matter who or what they were, that's what they always would say.

--Is this why I'm madhouse insane?

Another member of the Fungal Warriors arrived at the party with Brian. The name was Jason Grey. At first the two of them had been good friends. But Jason had been getting involved with some freako religious cult. Brian no longer needed friends anyway, especially religious ones. Once within the party universe, they quickly went their separate ways.

--I am the new messiah! I really,

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honestly am! My madness is just my mind opening up to the Beyond. And when Idobecomeenlightenednonewillstandagainstmyword I alreadyhavemillionsofrabidfanaticalfans whoworshipme.

And so it was that Brian Montague found himself adrift in the reality of a crowded living room. He secreted himself near an obscure bookcase as he attempted to pick out a girl for his evening's attention. It was something of an irritation when an ugly, sniveling, little, bald-headed man focused his putrid attention upon him.

"I've heard so much about you, Mr. Montague," he rasped, then snorted back some snot. "And I'd like to present you with a very, very, very, very, and very special gift."

That statement aroused enough of Brian's attention to cause him to stop observing legs. "What sort of gift?"

The man seemed to perk up and become less obnoxious as he said, "Have you ever heard of ZMP-X?"

"Nope." What's this sucker trying to push on me?

The bald personage didn't seem too terribly surprised at Montague's ignorance. "ZMP-X is a newly discovered chemical. The university I got it from dropped the project when it was shown to have no medical value. Luckily, an enterprising scientist saw its true value and sold the formula to some of my-er-pals."

"That's enough," said Montague. "It's a well-known fact that I don't take illegal drugs."

"But Mr. Montague! This is new, and no laws have been passed against it."

--Well now, that is interesting. Brian smiled. "And just what is so great about ZMP-X?"

"It allows our puny human minds to make contact with the superior forces that govern us and our Earthbound existences. Now then, I happen to have a tablet here. It is yours with my compliments. We are giving you this for free because if we can get a sponsor for the product, a few thousand of his fans may give it a try." He took a small piece of paper wrapped tightly around a small object and handed it to Brian. "The paper has my number on it, just in case you wish to refill your prescription. If not, well that's just our tough luck."

Brian glanced around the room. An isolated man had been keeping a watch on them. Undercover cop. Brian took the pill gently in his hands, placed it in his pocket, and made his way over to where the innocent police officer was standing.

"Excuse me officer. This is a non-illegal drug," he said, taking the pill from his pocket for a moment. "But just so you don't give me any trouble..." He slipped the man a thousand dollar bill. The man grinned and gave Brian a nod.

Montague saw that the bald man had vanished, so he bid some people goodbye and left the party.

Head in the clouds
Descending down the Hades-hole
Over the barriers of fire
Burning in the empty halls of my palace
Flames dancing before my eyes
At the crossroads of infinity
It comes darkly out of ether

Brian sat crosslegged in the center of a guest room on the east side of his own rented mansion. He was alone, all doors and windows locked. Nobody would catch him if he took the little green tablet that weighed heavily in the palm of his hand.

--What if it's poison? What if they're out to kill me? I could have it analyzed. No! I will make my decision here and now.

Ditching that fear, he couldn't help but remember the words of one of Jason Grey's flipped-out friends:

"The wise man who has true knowledge and a divine destiny requires no artificial aids to commune with God. He patiently waits for the Lord to contact him."

Yes, Jason really did hang out with an awful lot of freaks.

Finally, the decision reached, Brian dry-swallowed the tablet and relaxed. He calmly meditated upon the gods of all the religions he knew. After awhile he became tired of sitting with his legs crossed, so he lay on his back. Soon he was asleep.

--Dream of falling into a dark valley where oddness springs eternal.

I FOUND MYSELF IN AN UNKNOWN PLACE. IT WAS NOT A DREAM, FOR I COULD FEEL MYSELF BREATHING. I FELT THE SOLIDNESS OF WHATEVER I TOUCHED. I SMELLED MUSTY ODOR. I HEARD THE ECHOES OF MY FUTILE SHOUTS. THIS PLACE, WHICH COULD NOT HAVE POSSIBLY EXISTED ON THE EARTH I KNOW, WAS AS REAL TO ME AS A DOWNTOWN CHICAGO GHETTO WAS TO A MUGGER...

excerpt from Montague's diary

To be specific, it was a vast, crumbling, abondoned metropolis constructed from many-hued marble and psychedelic crystals. It was the forgotten dream of utopia given material existence. In a state of disrepair, it was a vision suffering disuse, yet of the sort that always haunted the fringes of the human mind. Something in Brian subtly said "Welcome home...."

Montague began to explore his tiny little area of the awesome city. He slowly weaved his way outside and around the great edifices that formed a jumble of once-coherant shapes. But he could find no way to enter them. The gargantuan metal doors had been slammed shut and securely locked. Brian wailed and cursed

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wondering what great secrets were hidden within.

Then from a temple
Beyond space and time
I heard the call
Of a silent chyme
I am AIWASS S S S S S s s s
The spirit that calls
Shouting out of the silence

Brian heard a call. But it was not vocal. It was an astral voice that caressed his deepest primeval instincts. A call he could not fail to heed, for it whispered to the slimey, mucous-coated portions of his mind.

He eagerly climbed over some shattered columns that lay across his path. Once over these obstacles, he jogged down a wide, emerald land. Soon he stood before a small, jewel-encrusted pyramid. Its golden door was cracked open ever so slightly.

"Hello? Who are you?" a mental voice inquired tonelessly. Brian was sure it had come from the pyramid.

"I'm Brian Montague. Perhaps you have heard of me."

The door soundlessly swung open. It was pitch black within the structure. But two glowing green eyes inquisitively peered at him. Most people would have felt shivers going up their spines, but Brian suffered a ghastly deluge of psychic impressions:

HOrrOr, dEath, EVIL, HiDeOus, dEMonic, PSYchotIC, helliSH, SaTAn-sPAWNed, COrRupTer OF SOulS, LoATHSOMe...

--It's some God-forsaken monster! I dare not look!

But when he felt a great rushing wind that heralded the creature's exit, there was no way he could resist the temptation. He looked upon it...in all its glory. It was the most painfully, exquisitely beautiful woman he had ever seen. Only those strange green eyes assured Brain that this was some diabolic creature in human form.

"Come hither, mortal. What dost thou wish of me?" it asked in a now sweet and melodious voice.

Brian shuddered, frozen with fear. But he managed to answer. "I-I'm here by accident. Drugs ya know..."

The creature shook its head sadly, tossing back its light-green hair. "Brian, I am going to grant you some wisdom. Come hither." But when it saw he was immobile with fear, it went to him. Brian tried to shy away as the false human placed a palm against his cheek. That palm was ice cold. It felt as though it was covered with polar frost.

She spoke again. "Don't use artificial aids to contact my kind. Wait for us to speak unto you."

Brian felt that the fright was about to explode within him as mindless panic. Terror played at his nerves as expertly as he played his guitar.

The creature smiled pleasantly, revealing perfect white teeth. The creation of human forms for themselves was probably considered a fine art among hell-gruesome demonics.

"Hear my words, mortal designated Brian Montague. I request thy permission to traverse to your humanworld. No, I beg of you, for my kind has always needed the hospitality of mankind in order to traverse."

Brian was still chilled by the alien presence and its ethereal permafrost even though she was no longer touching him. He wanted to scream. He felt his seams coming apart.

--Must hold together! Got to get it away from me!

"Yes, yes, yes! Go, I don't care!"

She smiled again. "I, Aiwass, thank thee." And just like that, the creature vanished. But for a moment the disembodied voice remained behind. "I shall be thy tutelary spirit."

"What?" asked Brian, unable to make out those last words. But Aiwass was gone He couldn't even pick up the creature's vibes anymore. So, finally, he just began to stumble around the ruins. The fear drained away, and he soon became sleepy. He curled up beside a shattered pillar and fell into a sound sleep.

--Dreams of sliding up a dark tube.

He awoke in the guest-room of his rented mansion. Of course he knew the experience had been no mere dream. It was all just as vivid a memory as his last concert. Never again would he touch ZMP-X. Not only had it been a bad trip, but he had released an unholy terror upon some remote corner of the earth.

Oh, well, time to work on a new song. Drive over to the studio the band had rented. Business as usual, right?

Voids unlimited
Under rocks
No time too much

--Good start on the lyrics, just need some music.

Phone call. Party invitation. At Jason Grey's rented mansion. Better go. Lots of publicity. "I'll be there." Hangs up. "Shit, another party." It was really about time for him to break his addiction to the publicity he usually thrived on. He called for his limo and put his cape on. Just this one last party, then he'd give them up.

Everybody who thought he was somebody was at this gathering. Brian didn't like any of them. Some of them even thought they were more important than the Fungal Warriors. Naturally, there were also a lot of Jason's nutzo friends present. It was even worse than usual, Grey had issued invites to representatives of all sorts

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of radical religious viewpoints. And the press hadn't even shown up yet.

Brian sat in a reclining chair and tried to isolate one of the nearby conversations about in-depth metaphysics from the babble of talk about current fads.

He had some success. "Ya see, the material world is just a playground for our imprisoned souls. Have some fun, do whatever ya want," says one fanatic. "Well, we actually conjured up a real succubus!" says another. "You cannot always believe what superior beings tell you," or "We each have a deep fear of the unknown forces, whether they be good or evil."

After awhile, Brian just melted into an obscure and private corner so that he could observe people without being too obvious about it. This time, the net of his observations caught some strange fish.

Cyrus Sybo, head of the local church of Satan, was one of these. Sybo was a colorful character, and it was the thing to do when inviting party guests to include a couple of Satanists. Spice things up.

When Sybo was at his best, he would be making the rounds, challenging people to rationally prove their beliefs. But he had been drinking too much this time. All he could do was keep repeating, to anyone who would listen, that "Prostitution would not be so widespread if it weren't for morality." An interesting quote the first time, but not the twenty-fifth.

"Ah, there you are Brian," said a pleasant voice. "I'd like you to meet someone." It was the voice of Jason Grey. Before Brian even turned around, he had decided Jason wanted him to meet some kook.

But what he saw almost shoved him off his rocker into an abyss of raving lunacy. Jason's guest was the thing from the other world. It still wore the same physical form, just having changed the hair color to a more typical brown. But those same eyes, those same damn green eyes, examined him closely.

"So nice to meet you, Mr. Montague," it said. "You can call me Diana Lancaster."

Brian managed to keep his poise. But another wave of his madness was sweeping him under, one in which he felt the thing's overpowering occult presence. "Excuse me, Ms. Lancaster," he gasped before dashing to...

The bathroom. Nobody would see him go mad in there. Smell of urine and vomit. Unflushed toilet. Intense fear. Brian's environment, external and internal, he thought as he briefly flipped out again. He had a friendly conversation with a cockroach who tried to explain the Theory of Relativity to him. But Brian was distracted by the dark and brooding image of the personality that lurked outside the bathroom door.

What to do, what to do? The creature was going to haunt and obsess him. He needed arcane advice. Or an exorcist. Or something....

Brian sat on the stool and wept bitterly. The cockroach tried to console him, until he savagely stepped on it. Then blood and pea soup began to drip from the ceiling. Before the seizure ended, the spirit of the dear departed bug was calling him obscene names.

When Montague came out of it, there was an angry knocking at the door and a shout. "How much longer ya gonna be?"

Brian yelled back. "Just a minute! and flushed the toilet.

Brian encountered the creature quite often. It had a psychic leash around Jason and seemed to go everywhere with him. Aiwass, aka, Diana Lancaster, played the part of human with great skill. Only Bria knew the truth, or even suspected it. Nat urally, he tried to avoid it, but he still ran into it quite often. It would only smile sadly as he hastened to leave the locality.

He had to do something. Because of tl beauty of the form it had taken, it was getting anything it wanted, establishing power in his corner of the universe. Soor it would come for him. It had to; he knew its secret.

Maybe he could kill it. Was that ever possible? Besides, he'd run the risk of being arrested for murder. As far as humanity was concerned, Aiwass was a humar being. Of course, if he was thrown into jail, they'd find out about his insanity. That would mean the asylum as opposed tc the penitentiary.

No, there had to be an occult method of forcing the demon back into its own realm of existence. Much as he deplored the thought, he would have to research magik and the mystic arts, try to find something genuine in what he considered to be a mass fraud, Looking for jewels in a big pile of manure.

The books piled up: Cosmic Trigger, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, The Satanic Bible, The Exorcist, Mythologies of th Ancient World, Son of Satan comic books, Man, Myth and Mythology, The Necronomicon. All of these and many more entered his library. But all he found ou was that a being named Aiwass had been the Holy Guardian Spirit of some infamous sorcerer of the early 20th century.

With a shudder, Brian realized he would have to consult some self-proclaim authorities in person. He couldn't keep reading books at random. He had other things to do; after all, he was a star.

All the fake fortune-tellers and cultists were quite pleased when a famous musician came to them. But he soon left. They didn't know squat about what Brian

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needed to know. But Aiwass existed, there must be a legitimate expert somewhere. Didn't know how to find them, didn't dare confide in someone who could help.

He received a phone call from Jason, who, for some reason, wanted to come over. Brian said he wouldn't be home. As soon as he hung up, he dismissed all the housekeepers, pulled the shades, locked the doors, and hid in the basement of his rented mansion. There was a small, empty storage room down there. He just took a tape-recorder and some tapes and prepared to spend some time in that unpleasant cubicle. Couldn't hear the phone or the doorbell.

Brian was lying on the floor, half asleep under the dim light of the room's single bulb, when insanity crept into the cortex of his brain again...That black void of nothingness materialized around him. He drifted helplessly, not only the center of his private universe, but the only thing in it. Almost.

Glowing red eye, luminous fangs in an invisible maw. Sinister chuckle. A deep, inhuman, ominous voice.

"You really do fear Aiwass, don't you?" it sneered. Brian didn't answer. Why answer an illusion? But the thing got upset and roared, "Don't you!"

Montague felt alien, icy terror creeping through him. Realization.

--By the gods! This thing is real, it's another one of those monsters!

The creature continued. "I'll give you the means to banish Aiwass." It laughed as a golden sceptor appeared suddenly. "With this you can compel the race of Aiwass to leave your earth. Bye bye." It vanished, as did the darkness. Only the sceptor remained.

--Well, well. This time my madness paid off. I can get rid of Aiwass now. Ha ha ha ah ha ha ha. Alright!

!!ENDITNOW!!

A while later, Brian called Jason Grey, evil joy burning in his heart. He intently studied the sceptor as he waited for his fellow band member to answer his private line.

"Hello?"

"Jason? Where's Aiwass?"

"WHO?"

"Sorry, I mean Diana."

"Which one, Brian? I got about three hangin' around."

"You know who I mean. Lancaster."

"Oh, that one. I invested in some farmland yesterday an' she wanted to stay at the old farmhouse all by herself. I guess she's kinda strange, if ya know what I mean."

Brian hung up and quickly jotted down the directions to the farm before he could forget them. Then he rushed out to his limo. Of course, he had to find his destination on the map in the glove compartment.

Montague hadn't driven for awhile, and he wasn't used to such a big car. It kept wandering off the road. And he couldn't help but glance at the scepter next to him on the front seat.

Finally, he found the dirt road that led to the farm Jason had bought. As he forced his car up the weed-covered road another vision from the land of his madness overtook him:

It seemed like a movie. He was even aware of credits. He felt detached from it all, as his astral body sat with a noncorporeal audience of galactic goof-offs. Roll the flick...

THE NEGATIVE GOD

Starring...

Marduk -- Lord Of Wisdom
Shiva -- God Of Antimatter
Satan -- He Who Presides Over Material Existence

Hit the lights

Dialogue...

Marduk: Nothing save infinite life-force. My race orbited it, sculpted it into reality. We were pleased. Almost.

Shiva: Start again! $E=MC^2$. Hurl into nowhere, annihilate, erase!

Satan: It's weird and wonderful. Esoteric angles.

Marduk: Strive for coherence!

Shiva: We blew it boys. We must uncreate and start again.

Satan: It's a gas! Aye laddies, thar's a wee beastie in the loch.

Marduk: I like Babylon! It's my home town!

Shiva: I hate Babylon!

Satan: I like the Harlot of Babylon!

FINI

(Soundtrack available through any medium

When Brian left the theater and returned to sanity, he found that his car had run into a ditch. But his divine gif was undamaged, so he left his automobile and set out on foot. His leg seemed to hurt, a dull pain pounding in it. He ignored that pain and limped slowly onwards. Never noticed he was bleeding... gazed ahead at the run-down farm... seemed to be at the end of a long and fuzzy tunnel.

--I die gonna? Huh? I think I'm stunned? Must get Aiwass, nothing to stop me. Understand?

But despite the haze over his brain, Brian was able to sense that Aiwass wasn in the house. It was behind the barn. Maintaining his hold on the scepter, he staggered toward his final confrontation.

He almost made it, but he accidently tripped over something, falling flat on his face. He rolled over and stared blankly up at the clouds slowly gliding through the blue ocean. Or was it the sky?

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After a few minutes of lazily doing nothing, he remembered his purpose. Struggling back up onto his feet, he went on his way, taking forever, slowly shuffling toward his goal. His mind's eye saw inginity beckoning.

Finally, finally, he found himself behind the barn. There had once been a garden there, but now it was overgrown with brown, knee-high brush. Useless weeds corrupting the fertile soil.

Naturally, Aiwass was clear at the other end, by a huge old tree. She (it) was running her (its!) fingers gently over the bark. Brian's insanity informed him that the leafy relic was pleased by the attention.

He tried to creep up behind his enemy, but Aiwass was warned by the tree. She (it?) turned and pleasantly smiled at him.

"You finally overcame your fear," she said happily. "Now I can teach you how to use your talent to perceive..."

Her voice trailed off when she became aware of the scepter. Expression of joy became one of disbelief, then of fear and despair. "I-I just wanted to help you, save you from mindlessness."

Much to his surprise, Brian felt pity. A pity that cut him to the marrow of his soul. That was when the barrier caved in.

Not quite like the other trips through the realm of madness. There was light every here. Everything projected dancing lights. Hidden voices spoke to him of things forbidden to repeat. The lights and voices burned the truth into him. Aiwass was not the true monster. The thing that had given him the scepter was the true evil.

Brian smashed that scepter savagely against the great tree. The mystic object shattered. He would have apologized to the tree, but he sensed that it didn't really mind.

No good or evil here, just peace of mind. Understanding was just beyond the horizon of this bold new world.

An hour later, they were relaxing under the tree. Aiwass was explaining: "You were born with a great gift, Brian. You can see beyond this reality. The talent was somehow suppressed in your childhood, but it had to manifest. Unfortunately, human society and your lifestyle twisted your talent into madness. Together, we can straighten it out." She looked to the tree. "There is a vast and ancient intellect within this old pine. Reach out with your unique inner ability, see if you can communicate with it."

And so it began. The young rock star and the supernatural entity spent much time together. In fact, they were virtually inseparable. The press finally picked up the scent. Various papers sent out investigators to find out about the mysterious Diana Lancaster. Much to their surprise, nothing was ever turned up. The respectable newspapers went with the "Montague's Consort Has No Past" story. The less respectable papers went with the "Montague's Girl Was Call-Girl From Las Vegas" type story.

Brian quit the Fungal Warriors and announced his retirement. It even made the network news. A month later they were married. A cosmic inside joke if ever there was one.

(Thus ends another metaphysical soap-opera.)

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J. D. Guse

EMPTY DREAMS

It was late. I was tired and nothing mattered more to me than the sight of my bed. There I was, driving northward on this pothole-stricken gravel road, expostulating my perception of life to the windshield, like I always do. Suddenly, I noticed the needle read empty, but thank God the car was still moving.

"Just my damn luck. I have a real good evenin' and now the car is gonna run out of gas."

What the hell, I'd just had a good meal, lots to drink, got laid, and to top it off, we went dutch.

Cyndie wasn't a woman of profound beauty. Nor was she that good in bed. But she was more unusual than any girl I had met before.

I met her at the university. I had quit school and moved back home, but we kept in closer contact now than before. We'd had one class together at college, but the relationship never went past studying for chemistry tests. Everything changed after I quit school. I started getting weekly phone calls, bi-weekly letters, and monthly visits. It was turning into a long distance love affair, which I was becoming increasingly unable to afford. Cyndie knew this, and so she volunteered to share expenses. The way I figure, when you ask a girl out and she says, "Let's go dutch," well, you're not gonna get laid. But Cyndie always acts like an empathetic soul who can't stand to see a person in a bad mood. The problem is that if you get Cyndie mad, she'll put you in a bad mood for the rest of your life.

Mom and dad had no idea about what was

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going on. They knew I gave trumpet lessons on Tuesdays and that I would be home late, but apart from that, they hadn't the slightest notion that I was traveling down some dirt road in the middle of nowhere, with five bucks in my pocket, and no gas.

"OK kid, they don't put gas stations on gravel roads. Let's find a high way."

I must have gone twice as far as I needed on that gravel road because I was dodging potholes left and right. And then, I was airborn.

"Holy shhh-----!"

I never finished that word. The car hit with such force on a ridge in the road that the ball joints snapped on the front end of the Mustang and my life seemed to halt before the car died. I got out of the car and surveyed the damage. Both front tires leaned to the left and the car hung to the right.

"Daddy's gonna be pissed," I crooned.

Well, I grabbed my coat, locked up the car, and started walking. Within an hour, I was on a main road trying to hitch a ride.

You know, it's hard for guys to hitch rides. I mean, they have no visual assets and drivers are usually too wary of what might happen. I finally flagged down a trucker, though, and he drove me to a truck stop near the highway I should have taken home.

"Thanks," I said flipping him the five bucks.

"Keep it. All I want is a cup of coffee."

"OK. I just gotta get some change and make a call. I'll meet ya in there in a bit."

I thought for a while on what to do as I made my way to the phone.

"Well, let's face it kid, it's late and there's only one person to call."

I dialed the number, threw in my money, and let the phone ring. I tugged at my pocket watch, checked the time, and searched the corridor for a clock that would confirm the time on my watch.

"It better be good," came a pathetically hoarse voice over the receiver.

"Uh, John, yea, this is Bob. Listen. I'm in a truck stop in Paxton off fifty-seven. I need....."

"What the hell are you doin' in Paxton?"

"I'll explain later. I need some help with the car."

"Okay, what happened?"

"John, all I want you to do is call my Mom and tell her something. Now get dressed and get your ass down here."

I gave John directions and joined my trucker. He had seated himself towards the back of the restaurant, facing the window. He seemed to be glaring at his truck outside.

"how's the coffee?"

"Oh, better'n some, worse'n others."

I'd guess his age to be about forty-five or so. He had blondish hair and squinting brown eyes that must have looked at the sun too often. His gray-streaked black beard didn't look like it fit his face right. He seemed to have cut or something on each side of his chin. His beard just quit. It looked awkward.

"What'd ja do before trucking? I aske sort of peevishly.

"I was in the Army."

"Oh, what rank?"

"Sargent."

"Why'd you quit?"

"Well, I was in th' Korean War, and after about a year or so I got captured. Well, they asked some things and I gave 'em some trouble and they cut my mouth up."

"What? You mean they beat you up?"

"No, no, they took a knife and made a cut on each side of my mouth."

He gestured with his left hand, separating his index and middle fingers, and running a straight line down from the cor ners of his mouth to the bottom of his chin. He stared down at his coffee and then glanced up to look for my reply.

"So like --- does that hurt you or anything -- I mean -- did it take long for you to talk again and stuff?"

"Well, I could talk after a few days, but I can't laugh. I can't even smile."

A humble "wow" was all I could muster I was trying to focus on his scars, but I constantly found my eyes fixed on his mouth. He was right, his mouth sagged and the expressions of his face were limited to his eyes.

We talked for about an hour and spli three pots of coffee between us. It wa about one in the morning and our conversation was broken by the sudden appearance of John.

"How the hell did you get down he so fast?" I said, standing up and grabbing my coat.

"How do ya think, dumb-ass?"

"It takes two hours to get here."

"So what? I'm here, right? So get your stuff and let's go!"

I walked to the counter and paid th bill as I watched the wall in front of me. My shadow suddenly encompassed the beige wall-hanging as car lights from t hind pierced through the snow-streaked windows. I hurried out the door, hoppe in John's 4-wheeler, and bolted off int the darkness.

"Where the hell are we goin?" John asked as he shifted gears.

"Up about a mile or so is a white house on our—let's see—left—I think."

"Great. Ya don't know where your damn car is."

"The house is on our left, and the

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a road right after that. And ya make a right on that road."

Well, we worked our way out to the car, with me racking my brain to remember where I had abrubtly parked, and John smashing my body into the truck door because of all the potholes he managed to encounter. On the way to revisiting the site of impact, I explained to John the predicament.

"Holy Shhh---------!"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"What'd ya hit?"

"I don't know."

"Well, let's find out."

We approached my car and then drove past the Mustang. We went a good 25 yards before discovering the culprit.

"Ya know, Bob, you're supposed to slow down when ya reach these side road bridges."

"Yeah, and now you're gonna play my damn father 'n tell me you never did somethin' like this. Well, let's just figure out what we're gonna do."

"I don't think we're gonna be able to do much to it in the dark here."

"You wanna tow it home?"

"Why not? I mean, I already told your ma that you'd be spendin' the night at my house."

"OK, let's do it!"

We chained the car to the truck and proceeded to slambang our way home. By the time we reached John's house, we had decided our plan of action. We put the Mustang in the garage and drove off to the nearest junk yard.

"There's a yard about a mile out of town. I think I saw a 'Stang there last week," John said as he floored the accelerator, while trying to pull two speeders out of his front pants pocket.

"Here, take one o' these. Yer gonna need it. We're gonna be up all night."

I reluctantly downed the pill as John parked along the roadside. We got out of the truck and climbed the fence of the junk yard with tools in every orifice of our clothing.

"C'mere Bob, I found it."

There, to my amazement, was a '67 Mustang with all the parts I needed for my car.

"Well, let's do it," John whispered under the car with a flashlight. We worked for about a half hour before getting all the parts we needed. Methodically, we climbed the fence, dumped the parts in the pick-up, and raced for home.

"Let's grab a cup of coffee," John said as we paced towards the door.

"Sounds good."

John worked on making the coffee while I called home.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, ma, I'm at John's."

"Yeah, he called me last night. What happened?"

"I must have fell asleep watching a movie."

"OK. Will you be home for supper?"

"Ah--yeah--about six. OK?"

"All right."

"I gotta go. Bye ma."

"Bye bye."

I stayed at John's for another hour preparing myself for school. At seven o'clock, I thanked John for his help, hopped in my car and drove off. I was thinking over my excursion, talking over the experience with my windshield when I saw that needle again.

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Chris Engelhardt

PLAYING THE BLUES

Her fingers caressed the ivory keys. The rich full sounds intermingled in the air with the cigarette smoke haze that hung in the living room. Half a dozen empty beer cans littered the piano. A few more had been clumsily knocked to the floor. A cracked ashtray balanced precariously on the edge of the highest key. When the song required that she play in the upper register, the ashtray began to dance fearfully on the edge, like a native dancing on hot coals.

A body lay motionless on the couch. Jan slept, contorted in a weird position, amongst the junk that littered the couch. A pile of records was stacked at one end, her clothes from the weekend lay jumbled here and there, while Sebastian, the taffy yellow tom cat, slept comfortably nestled in a pair of her old jeans.

Diane continued to play, squeezing o a slow blues riff. "She must be drunk or dead tired to be sleeping through all this noise," Diane thought as she bit he lip while her fingers danced around a tricky phrase she'd been practicing a day. "More than likely, she's drunk." She and Diane started drinking shortly before noon, and it was now approaching two a.m. Diane had kept herself in check, not wanting to drink too much because it interfered with the way she played. Jan just inhaled one beer afte another all day long. "I can see why she doesn't care how drunk she gets. Sh doesn't have to get up for anything in

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the morning, or any morning for that matter.

Both girls were seventeen and were dropouts. Jan's excuse was that high school was filling her mind with too many unimportant things. She felt the teachers were all a bunch of creeps. Jan wanted to get out and really live. She did. The day after Jan quit school her parents kicked her out of the house.

She spent her sixteenth birthday on the streets. That's the day Diane met her.

Seven months younger than Jan, Diane dropped out of high school half way through her sophomore year. She didn't feel that school was getting her where she wanted to go. Music was her life; the piano her closest friend. She always said she would have gone back to school if someone cared. Dave, her father, merely shrugged his shoulders, "If that's what you want."

Dean, her twenty-one year old brother, who still lived at home, didn't even know she dropped out for three weeks. Dean spent most of his time with his so-called friends getting high. Many a night he slept in his rusty seventy-one Camaro because he was unable to find his way home.

Diane had been close to Dean when they were younger. He was her big brother. It was Dean who taught her how to ride a two-wheeler. He had a kind of reckless courage, never showing any fear, said training wheels were for babies. But when their mother deserted, Dean changed. He no longer cared what happened to himself or Diane. He was lost. Diane felt as though he was searching for something, but drifting from reality. He got messed up with the wrong kind of people. Diane felt it was their Mother's leaving that led Dean to drugs. He had started with pot and speed, but soon was doing harder stuff. Diane had no idea what all he was into now.

Her eyes started burning. She had a hard time focusing on the keys. A dim light stood on the paint-chipped piano. Diane's only tangible memory of her mother other than the faded picture her father kept on his dresser struggled to cut through the thick cigarette haze. Her music slowly faded away. Getting up, stretching her legs, stiff from sitting so long, she walked over to the couch. Crumpling up her jacket for a pillow, she settled herself down at the foot of the couch and quickly feel asleep.

Jan came to life when she heard Diane banging pots in the kitchen.

"Why don't you try to be a little quieter in there? There's people trying to sleep." Jan twisted over onto her back, startling Sebastian. He jumped off the couch and slowly stretched his way to the kitchen.

"If you didn't drink so much, you'd be able to get up at a reasonable hour like the rest of the world."

"What time is it anyway?"

"It's almost eleven. Dave left some money and a note to pick up some groceries. Want a cup of coffee? I made a fresh pot."

Jan rolled off the couch and quickly grabbed her head. She felt as if her brains were swelling and about to gush right out her ears. "How about two aspirins over easy?" She stumbled into the kitchen and sank into the chair at the far end of the table.

"I thought this evening we could go down to Mac's, that new bar on the corner of Vine and Fifth. I hear they're looking for someone to play some background music, kind of like in the movies." Diane opened one of the cupboard doors and pulled out an almost depleted bottle of aspirins.

"I guess we'll have to add these to the list," she mumbled as she tossed the bottle over to Jan. Not expecting anything to come flying at her, Jan didn't catch the bottle. Instead, it glanced off her shoulder and landed on Sebastian, who had curled himself up in one of the chairs. He jumped up and ran over to the back porch door, letting out a cry of disapproval. Diane opened the door and Sebastian slipped out into the wilds of suburban Oak Ridge.

"Do you really think they'll give you the job? Sure, you're good, the best I've ever heard, but you're only sixteen. You have to be at least twenty-one in this state to get into that joint." Jan picked up the aspirins and chased them down with a sip of black coffee.

"You're beginning to sound more and more like Dave every day. He said the same thing this morning when I suggested the idea to him. Do you think I want to spend the rest of my life like him? Day in and day out to the same old factory, doing the same job for eight hours, with no satisfaction, nothing to encourage you to get better?"

"No, but do you want to end up like your mother?"

As soon as Jan spoke, she wished she could swallow what she said and crawl into the wall or something.

Diane's mother, Rebecca, played the piano just like Diane, and sang too. She was damn good. She played down at Kelly's bar on the other side of town. It wasn't a fancy place. It was frequented by truck drivers and lonesome men. Diane heard people say that it was her mother that they came to hear. The place used to be packed every Friday and Saturday night. Rebecca's songs eased the hurt of loneliness and aroused the passions of every man traveling through McClellan County. It was at Kelly's where Rebecca met Dave. They fell in love. After they were married, Dave wanted Rebecca to quit her job

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He didn't want his wife being the star of other men's dreams. He knew what those men felt for her. He had been one of them himself. Rebecca agreed, out of blind love, giving up her career to become a wife and mother.

After the birth of Diane, Rebecca began to dream of some day making it big. She felt she had the talent. All she needed was that one big break. But she was trapped. She was stuck in the middle of a nowhere town, the mother of two children, and married to a man who no longer worshipped her at all. Indeed, he took her for granted. Dave started stopping at bars after work and stayed later and later each day, while Rebecca stayed at home, softly twisting a melody out of the old upright piano she found at a garage sale.

Rebecca hid her frustration for years, but all the while her dreams were still brewing inside her. Shortly after Diane's eighth birthday, Rebecca took Diane and Dean to their grandmother's house to spend the day.

She never came back.

When Dave came home, the house was empty. A note was pinned to his pillow on the bed. It said she couldn't stand living any longer in the walls he had built around her. She was taking a second stab at making herself into somebody.

That was nine years ago. Since then, Dave had been both mother and father. He worked long hours and no longer stopped for drinks after work.

Diane ignored Jan's reference to her mother, but for the rest of the day she didn't act like herself.

The two of them wasted the day listening to records. Diane tried to play along while Jan, who was no singer, mouthed the words, making wild gestures as if she were a rock star on stage.

At about seven o'clock, they got ready to go to Mac's to ask about the job. Diane tried to make herself look older by putting her makeup on a little darker. She slipped into a pair of tight jeans that clung to her tiny hips and put on an off-white, oversized, loosely-woven sweater with long billowy sleeves and a deep v-cut neckline.

They walked down the neon-lit streets and talked about the two main concerns of every teenage girl, clothes and guys. Mac's wasn't too far away so they didn't try to hitch a ride, which they were accustomed to doing, seeing that neither one of them stuck around high school long enough to learn how to drive.

It wasn't long before they reached Mac's. Diane summoned up all her courage and pushed open the door. The place was smokey and dimly lit. Two guys were shooting pool at the table in the corner. Diane walked up to the bar and asked the bartender, "Can I talk to the manager?"

"You're looking at him, little lady. What can I do for you?" He looked like he was around thirty years old. He had blond hair, feathered back on the sides, and a slim, rather smirkish smile.

"I came to ask about the job for a piano player."

"For who, you?"

"Yes. If you'd like, I could play something to let you know how I sound."

"I'm sorry, sugar, but you're a bit too young to be playing in a place like this."

"But I'm really good. Let me show you."

"Like I said, I'm sorry, little lady. Why don't you come back in a few years? Maybe then I'll consider it."

The rejection hit her like a brick as they stepped out into the cool evening.

"Come on. Don't get discouraged. Look at it this way. At least you got a few more years to practice. By then, you'll be ready to blow them away."

"Sure."

Seeing that Diane was in no mood for doing much of anything, Jan suggested they go back home and just get drunk, which they did, or at least Jan did.

It wasn't even midnight before Jan passed out on the couch again. Diane looked at her and felt pity. Jan had no dreams, nothing to shoot for.

Diane felt caged, not by a marriage like her mother, but by her age. She pulled a battered knapsack out of the closet and filled it with some jeans and a few blouses. "It's hard for me here. I can't pass for twenty-one. But in other states the drinking age is only eighteen. I can do that!"

She slipped out the back door, made her way to the nearest highway, and stuck her thumb out.

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Mark Hulfactor

MY GRANDPA IS OVERSEAS

Can I go with?" I said to my gramdms. She was going to see my Grandpa. I had never seen him. I had a hunger to visit my Grandpa -- a Grandpa I'd heard about but never seen in my entire ten year old life.

"You're sure you want to go?" Grandma asked, as she packed our lunch for the day. "You'll miss the parade and your papa's speech.

"So what!" I said. "It's the same thing as last year. And I've never seen Grandpa."

"Are you sure you want to go?" she said.

"I want to go, Grandma."

"Okay," she said.

I shook the hair out of my eyes and watched as she gently lifted a faded old flag from her round-top trunk. I thought about my Grandpa all the time. Too often, I'd met this unknown grandpa in my dreams and imagination. Always, I walked up to a tall, strong man, sort of a combination of my preacher father and my favorite uncle, to announce, "Hello. I'm your grandson. Nell is my mama, but grandma says I belong to her."

And always the strong man answered, "Hello, Max. If you belong to your grandma, that's good enough for me." My imagination balked at this point. What did you say to a grandpa you didn't really know? Did you invite him to walk with you to the candy store? Or talk to him about Rusty, your dog? Or just answer him as he'd answer you, "I know Grandma likes you Grandpa, so I'll like you too."

My town, Homer, really celebrated Armistice Day. All week at Central Park School, we had sung "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "America." Today people would line up along Main and First Streets to watch old soldiers march past. Most of their uniforms seemed small, but the men wearing them walked proud. This was their day, I sensed.

Later, everyone would gather down at the park for all types of food and beer. They would have chicken, sandwiches, chicken salad, potato chips and all. Some of the people would get very drunk and sometimes there was even a fight.

When it was my dad's turn to speak, he would tell everyone how this was not a holiday, but a holy day. Last year, when he said this, at the same time everyone said, "Amen." Then the police came.

When they left, I saw that Mr. Friend was riding with them in the back seat. He was one of the town's most popular people and worked at the bank. I heard people saying that he stole some money. I didn't believe them, though, since I knew he went to church every Sunday. I'd just have to miss all of this fun. But I'd have something better to do. I'd finally see the man who walked so often in my imagination.

"Mind you, keep your sweater buttoned," Grandma said as we climbed into her big car. I think it was a Cadillac, or something that rich people buy.

We left Homer and seemed to ride between two cliffs most of the way. We crossed West Fork River, and stopped on River Avenue before a gray-stone building that was four stories high. There was an archway with a high iron gate, and over it were the words "State Asylum."

"Why do they call it an asylum, Grandma? Asylums are for crazy people."

"Sometimes asylums are just what they should be -- a resting place for people who get lost in life."

We walked through the gate into a courtyard where men in faded clothes roamed the lawns.

"Are all these people supposed to be in here?" I asked Grandma.

"No, Max. Some of them are visitors," she answered.

"Why did everyone come today?" I asked.

"Because today is Armistice Day, you know that. Today, even the violent ones are able to celebrate. Like your grandpa. The war did many that way. The lucky ones just lost an arm or a leg. The sad ones are these men whose minds were ruined by shellshock or gas."

"Which one is Grandpa?" I asked, searching the crowd.

"He's inside," said Grandma. "Often he's one of the violent ones, so he usually is kept in his room."

Inside, we waited in a big room until an attendant led us up three flights of stairs, unlocked a door, and walked with us down a long corridor. He left us finally at the door of a small room. Tacked to the door was a card that read: "John Allen, male. MAXIMUM SECURITY."

Grandma took a deep breath. A smile appeared upon her face as we walked into the room. "Hello John," she said. Her voice was soft, the way it was when she talked to my newest little cousin.

I looked around the small room. High up, a narrow window let sunshine in the room. The light touched a small table, a straight chair; it did not touch the iron bed where a man sat in silence. The shoulders drooped under a blue work shirt. Where bones did not jut out, his face was gray and lined, and his eyes were vacant. He didn't look violent. He just looked old. He was not the Grandpa of my dreaming. I felt let down.

"Hello John," she said again.

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"Eh?" the vacant eyes found her.

"Lena?" he questioned. And suddenly the eyes weren't vacant anymore. He looked at Grandma as if she were beautiful.

"He's going to be all right," I thought. Maybe we'll take him with us. Maybe he would change all over the way his eyes had been when he'd seen Grandma.

Grandma sat on the straight chair. I stood by her side. Grandpa seemed not to know I was there. He kept his eyes on Grandma. "I'm right glad to see you, Lena. I don't know how you made it all the way to England."

"It wasn't hard," Grandma said.

"You didn't leave the kids alone, did you?"

"No, John," Grandma said. "I didn't leave them alone. Are you hungry?"

"No. The whole platoon ate just a little while ago."

"What?" I said. He didn't seem to hear me. Grandma told me to shhh. I wondered why she didn't tell him that the war was years ago.

"All I do over here is think of you, Lena — when we're not fighting," the old man said. "Have to watch it, though, or I'll be going out of my mind."

"You're not out of your mind," she said.

Shocked, I looked at Grandma. That was a lie. Dad could preach for an hour on that. Grandma still smiled, but tears started coming down her cheeks. I decided that it wasn't a lie after all. Dad wouldn't ever know anything about it.

It seemed we had no more than entered the room when a shuffling began out in the corridor. Grandma rose.

"Time to go now, John," she said. The old man still didn't look at me, even as we were leaving the room.

He said goodbye to Grandma, and the vacant look came back into his eyes.

I turned for a last look at the ivy-colored building.

"Goodbye Grandpa," I whispered, finally admitting that the old man inside really was my Grandpa.

I knew I'd never go back.

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Marge Peterson

DIRGE

The night is black
The wind reels
A heart screams out
Full of agony
Tortuous pain
Descends
Echoing
Jangling
Through the dark abyss
Of a slow dying soul
And no one hears, and no one hears...

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WHERE IS ENOUGH?

The work piles up around my head,
The floor is sticky, the bed unmade,
And love is not enough.

The children cry for godd reason or not,
With needs misunderstood but sometimes met,
And love is not enough.

The bills come in on a regualr basis,
Growing ever larger and can't be paid,
And love is not enough.

Everyone cares for one another
Wanting each to feel a little better,
And love is not enough.

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LOST SOULS

Love has brought much pain,
To souls whose only wish,
Was to express themselves completely,
Through echoes of sweet refrain,
Once formed in one heart alone,
And shared sweetly with another,
Receptive to this kindred beat.
But somewhere in life's rhythmns,
The beats became opposed,
And cannot ever again,
Attain an according sound,
Try as each tender soul might,
The control of all timing is lost;
Feelings become discordant,
And souls in agony depart,
All rhythmn lost, a moan is left.

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Marge Peterson

THE MOUNTAIN WOMAN

It was an electric spring night, black as coal, with glaring blades of lightening ripping through the skies. Thunder shook the earth and startled the creatures in the Appalachian mountains below. The limbs of ancient trees waved and tossed violently in the roaring winds. The river in the valley swelled as it rushed along, shrinking its banks.

A bent, gnarled figure took form at the edge of the woods, oblivious to natures violence. A long hood concealed her face and a crude leather sachel was grasped in her knobby hand. This was the mysterious old mountain woman, never seen by the mountain people unless someone was sick or injured or having a baby, at which time she appeared suddenly to tend the need and, as quickly, disappeared. She had been part of the mountains for as long as any of the people could remember, was both respected and feared, and accepted only because of their need. No one knew where she lived, and some believed her to be an apparition that became part of the mountain mist. Others XX built great stories of boiling cauldrons in flaming caverns deep in the hills. Yet none turned her away when she came.

On this wild night Sara was born in a one-room shack on the edge of the wood. The old woman and her ancient skills were on their way to tend Sara and her mother, Emma. As the old woman entered the shack, her presence changed the atmosphere of the room. The fire in the blackened hearth blazed brighter, casting agitated forms around the walls. Pungent forest smells filled the air and the crackle of electricity vibrated in with the damp wind. The door slammed shut and the old woman's glittering eyes swept the room.

Cody, the child's father, sat nervously on the rough-hewn chair opposite the bed, his elbows on his legs and his large hands flexing and unflexing between his knees. His wife's time had come and he had put her to bed, waiting for the old woman, knowing she would be there to do what he could not. His anxious eyes followed her around the room. He had seen her only once before, when his father had been hurt in the coal mines. He had been very young then, but remembered vividly her trembling fear for his father, not knowing whether this stranger, who seemed to fill the entire room, was able to make his precious father well or carry him away to the pits of hell. Many hours later, the stranger had left, taking with her the pain from his father's face. He had held Cody's hand and told him all was well. Cody had been relieved, but that ominous feeling had never left him. Once again, he must put complete faith in this overwhelming form.

Having looked Emma over from top to bottom, the woman lifted a large pot from the floor by the hearth, and, stepping back out the door, dipped it deep into the rain barrel which was running over from the still-pouring torrent. Having hung it over the blazing fire, she scooped out a bit with a chipped cup and returned to Emma. She took a tiny pouch from her bag and stuck her damp finger inside, extracting a finger coated with "seng" powder. She stuck it rapidly into Emma's mouth, followed by water, having no interest in discussion or argument. She then removed her hooded cloak and spread it over the table, placing the leather sachel on top.

Her matted old hair was held back with a string, her face was tanned and crinkly here and there, but surprisingly smooth. Her eyes were darkly animated. She moved smoothly and slowly to the bed, adjusted the covers and fixed Emma with an intense, hypnotic look. Emma stared with wide eyes, following each rasped instruction as if afraid if she did not, the next word would curse her soul. Thunder shook the dwelling as beads of sweat began to cover Emma's face. The woman saw to Emma's remaining needs and covered her warmly. Soon, Emma dozed over a cup of warm camomile tea, Cody seated by her side to steady the cup.

The old woman turned her attention to the baby. She moved the pot of tepid water to the end of the table and poured in a powder that turned it to the deep green of the dense forest. She mumbled as she dipped the child into the water three times, submerging it completely the last time with a rapid movement. Cody watched over his shoulder with mouth agape. The old woman bent to lay the child on the cloak, turning her head as she did and piercing Cody with her dark eyes, silencing him before his words could escape his throat. Wild witch tales flashed through his intimidated mind. The old woman gazed at the babe long and deep, as if seeing into her very soul. Cody caressed Emma's hair as his worried eyes noted every movement the old woman made. Finally, the child was returned to her mother. Cody watched with an odd foreboding as the old woman left in the hissing rain and disappeared into the deep woods.

Late that night, as Cody and Emma slept with the babe between them, the storm cleared. A full moon shown softly. The mountains were breathless as a speck of moonlight crept through a crack in the shutters and lay upon the child. The child's eyes startled open and stared silently back at the moon. A misty shadow drifted around the

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cabin and then joined the dark of the woods as an owl hooted in the forest depths.

Soon after Sara's birth, both Cody and Emma returned to their daily struggle for survival. Cody left early each morning with a lunch bucket in his hand, to work in the mines. It was a five mile walk to work, but with the money he made they could buy the necessities they could not grow or gather themselves. In the evening as the light began to fade, he would return tired and completely black. He washed in a tin basin just inside the door and changed his clothes before collapsing at the dinner table.

Emma cleared more stones from the mountain side to make the garden larger, so that there would be enough food for their table during the long winter. Their few clothes were scrubbed on a board and hung over a rope in a grey line between two trees. She gathered edible weeds and roots from the woods along with the eggs of their wandering chickens, made soap in a huge vat from lye and animal fat, and assembled some extra blankets from bits and pieces of old clothing. While Emma worked, the baby lay on a blanket near the shack, waving her tiny arms at the sunbeams and butterflies.

Emma and Cody's hearts were filled with love for this tiny addition to their lives. In the evening, when all their work was done, their time was spent holding and playing with Sara.

As spring passed into summer, Emma became busier and busier, gathering food as it ripened and fighting the rocks and weeds that hindered her way. Sara added to her work, being inclined to roll and creep off her blanket and stick anything at hand into her mouth.

One day, Emma was particularly intent upon her work as a storm was threatening and she wanted to harvest as much as possible before it hit. As the first drops of rain began to fall, she grabbed her basket and headed for the tree where she had left Sara. There was only the blanket. She searched the area in wider and wider circles. As the rain came down harder, she became frantic, calling and dashing about. The baby was nowhere. Returning to the shack, she stood by the open door and cried. Finally, the rain subsided, and the sun slowly appeared. Emma stepped out of the shack to continue her search, fearful for her baby's health and safety. As she did so, the smiling baby crept out of the wood.

That evening, when Cody returned from the mines, Emma told him what had happened. As she finished her story, they both looked over at the baby where she sat in her bed. Sara stared back at them with solemn eyes that mocked them for their concern.

That night, Emma and Sara slept and Cody stared at the darkness above him. He thought of the story his wife had related to him and of the strange events on the night Sara was born. A chill crept over him. The next morning he awoke in a fever that kept him in bed for five days.

Each day after that, the moment Emma's attention strayed from her, the child disappeared. Emma worried. She could not watch Sara every moment and still get her work done. Nor could she spend all her time in fruitless searching. Their survival depended on the crops. After a while, Emma gave up hunting for the child, although her eyes continually strayed to the edge of the wood in hope of seeing Sara. Somehow, Sara always returned safe before evening.

As summer turned to winter, Emma was able to keep Sara indoors. Sara could not wander off, and Emma began to relax. Yet, each day Sara would spend more and more time sitting in the middle of the room staring at the door with a wide, serious gaze. Even if Emma picked her up and moved her to another spot, trying to involve her in some plaything, Sara would turn again to stare at the door. Cody, too, tried to coax her attention away, but with no more success.

Sara became more and more distant. Their pleasant evening playtime disintegrated. She pushed them away when they tried to hug her and never returned their smiles. Emma would reach out to pick her up, but Sara would turn and walk away. Emma's hand would drop limply to her sides, tears in her eyes. Cody would sit at the table looking bewildered and sad.

Spring was approaching again and Emma and Cody knew there would be no containing Sara, that again she would be disappearing into the wood. Emma put it off for as long as she could, leaving Sara alone in the closed shack the first few days, as she started preparing the garden. The child cried, then wailed, until the fourth day, Emma could stand it no longer and let her out.

Sara did not even wait for her mother's attention to wander, but toddled off immediately into the wood, as if she knew exactly where she was headed. Emma tried to follow. She desperately pushed and shoved through the bushes and branches, turning one direction, and then another, as she lost sight of the child. The brittle twigs and thorns scratched at her arms and pulled at her clothing. She felt certain if she could just find out where the child was going, somehow they would be able to make Sara theirs again. She could almost feel the child's loving arms around her neck. She wanted it so bad. She cried and fought the woods, but soon lost sight of Sara. With a feeling of helplessness and frustration, she turned and left the wood. Sitting down at the door of the shack, all

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the pain in her heart burst forth in great sobs.

Sara was aware of her mother's presence, but gave it no thought. Soon she arrived at a small clearing by a pond and seated herself on a dusty moss knoll. Her tiny hands relaxed on her crossed legs. With all movement suspended, she looked like a dwarfish statue. Her wide eyes moved slowly from side to side, her head still, waiting and watching. Soon, the small animals came out of their leafy shelters and roamed about, where she could watch them. No movement was missed by intent stare. She watched the pink Spring Beauty nod and wave as the rabbit slowly hopped over it, searching for wild clover. A striped skunk waddled by, pausing occasionally to check out any lingering scents.

Sara's eyes left the animal activity and peered intently at the growth opposite the pond. A grey figure approached. Sara leapt up, clapping her hands. The old mountain woman picked her up and Sara hugged her enthusiastically. They sat down together on the moss and faced the pond. The water was a deep green and rippled occasionally when a breeze managed to find its way through the thick growth of trees. A moth sat on the side of a nearby tree and drank of its sap, where a woodpecker had made it bleed. The bluejays screamed overhead as they tried to steal eggs from other birds' nests.

The woman pulled a dingy bag from the folds of her formless dress and produced a tin cup and a wooden vial. She ladled out a cup of green water from the pond and poured some drops into it from the vial. Taking a few sips, she passed it to the child, who drank deeply. Somewhere in the distance, a crow voiced a hoarse call; then all was silence, a deafening silence of expectation. The special potion would have had no effect on anyone but the chosen chile. There had been no doubt in the old woman's mind. She still had many good years in her, but it was time to start training her replacement. Sara climbed upon the old woman's lap and fell into a deep sleep, full of dreams and visions. The old woman rocked back and forth humming, a satisfied smile on her face. The forest sounds returned.

Much later, as the light began to dim a bit, Sara awoke to find herself alone on the moss. She turned and crawled away, as much a part of the scene as the animals. She cleared the wood and seated herself by the shack, a look of peace on her face.

From then on, Sara was gone for some part of every day. Emma and Cody would often sit at the table after dinner and wonder between themselves where she was going. Neither were ever able to follow her for any distance. Sometimes, they would try to hold her on their laps and play with her, but she was always very cold and distant to them, as though they were strangers. Cody often heard Emma crying softly in the middle of the night, echoing his own deep sorrow.

The summer days became shorter and shorter. Parts of the garden gave up its last harvest and died. As the nights lengthened, Sara would sit woodenly in her chair at dinner, eating less and less. Soon, they were unable to get her to eat enything. Cody, no matter how he tried, could not understand what was happening. Yet, deep inside he knew they had now lost her completely, there being nothing further that she needed from them.

On a windy fall day, Emma cleared the last dying plant from the garden and returned to the shack. She and Cody had given up and drawn close together, comforting one another in their mutual sorrow. That night, it was as though Sara was not there. They ate their evening meal and cleared away the dishes together talking softly about the harvest and the winter to come. The next morning Sara was gone. They were both sad and relieved. They knew they would never see her again.

As the years went by, the old mountain woman continued to tend the need of the people, and fifty years later, they were still weaving stories about who she was and where she came from. And on another wild and stormy night, a baby girl was born.

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Irma Kump

THE RIVER CHOIR

The most memorable sounds I ever heard were in my village, Caramanico, on wash days. On a sunny and clear day, the singing would float up in ripples from the Orfenta River at the base of our mountains.

The women of the village washed clothes once a month. From May to October, the washing was done in the Orfenta. When it was frozen over, the women would wash in the small stream on the mountain.

As they gathered outside their doors, the women would decide on a washday, according to the weather conditions. If the designated day were suitable, you would see them all leaving their homes with their woven cane baskets balanced on their heads, piled high with laundry. A rolled

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cloth placed in a circle on top of their heads formed a base for the heavy load. The cane baskets were made by the men of the village, through the long winter months, from cane they had planted, picked, and dried. With sharp knives, they cut strips from the bamboo-like stalks.

The women walked majesticly down the steep path, winding down a mile to the river. The years of balancing heavy weights on their heads had given them all a regal posture. They carried their lunches of bread and cheese in square linen cloths. By tying two opposite corners and leaving a space, they made a satchel with a convenient handle.

After settling their baskets on the river bank, the women would place a folded cloth, as a pad, on the flat rocks. Kneeling on their pad, with a large rock in front of them, as a washboard, they would dunk a piece of clothing into the cold river. Then they placed the wet article over the rock and lathered it with home-made lye soap.

The singing would start.

When I accompanied my mother at the river, I usually played with the other children. When I would get tired, I would sit by her side and sometimes join in the singing. The songs were learned very young, handed down from generation to generation. There were many different songs, and when the women would finish singing one song, someone would start another, and the rest would join in.

Sometimes I didn't go with my mother but stayed in the village with my grandfather. We would sit at our doorstep and listen as the sounds vibrated from the river and bounced off the mountains and surrounded us. The diffused waves carried by singing breezes would skip and then catch the sound again. The music seemed heaven-like. The whole world was a song.

I would liken the sound to our modern day stereo, only on a larger scale. No stereo could capture the scope of this choir. The surrounding mountains provided the natural acoustics. The sounds would bounce off the mountains, echoing their accompaniment to the new wave of songs.

One day mother waked me with a shock, "Irma, your granpa has died. Run and tell your Aunt Maria. Then run and go to Santa Nicola and get Father DeMarco."

The parade of people started coming, to pay their last respects to Grandpa. The next day, Mr. Egizio came with a coffin and took Grandpa out of his bed and put him in the wooden box. Men carried the coffin to Santa Nicola for the funeral mass.

With my grandfather gone, I always accompanied my mother on the monthly trips to the river. It took two days to complete the wash. The first day, the clothes would be lathered and scrubbed on the rock. They would be wrung out, but left highly lathered. The wet clothes would be placed in the basket, and the women all helped each other getting the baskets back on their heads. The weight had now tripled. They would help to carry the weight by raising their arms and holding the baskets steady with their hands. Washing clothes was hard work, but it was made lighter by having the companionship of the other women.

When the women arrived home, they would take their conca to the fountain in the center of the village. The copper conca for carrying water had a twelve or fourteen inch round base, and was about twenty-two inches high. It was shaped as gracefully as a vase, with curved handles that looked like twisted cord.

"Mr. Caroselli, make me three different size concas, a small and a large pan, a small pot for coffee, a large pot for pasta, two large kettles, and a vat." My mother had placed the order in, upon her engagement to my father. It would be part of her dowry. Mr. Caroselli was proud of his concas. His design was indigenous to our village. He hammered a two inch desing of slanted lines around the conca. The lines would be outlined by tiny dots, making it look like a ribbon. The tiny lines of dots were repeated at the base of the conca and at the top

When the concas were filled, the women would stoop under the waist-high ledge of the fountain and place the concas on their heads over the circular pads. They would carry their concas back to their kitchens and empty the water into two kettles hanging on heavy hooks in the fire place. The wood-burning fire would start to heat the water, while the women went back to the fountain to get more water. It usually took three trips to get enough water.

When the water came to a boil, the ashes from the wood would be stirred into the boiling water. The lathered clothes had by then been transferred into a large vat. A cheesecloth had been placed tautly over the clothes, the ends held tightly in place under the weight of the vat. The hot ash water would be strained over the cheesecloth onto the clothes. The ashes would be discarded. Then the clothes would be stirred in the vat and left to soak and bleach overnight.

The next day the clothes were wrung out and placed back into the baskets. The women took their cheese and bread and concas and headed for the river. If it had been raining, the women would wait for the first nice day.

The women took pride in their sparkling white laundry. Their underclothes and linens were all white and woven on their own looms. They would rinse their laundry in the clear river water, wring

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them out by hand, and scatter the clothes over bushes and rocks to dry in the sun. The women would team up in pairs with their sheets. Each holding two corners, they would bring their hands together up high as if folding the sheet, and then, in synchronization, they would snap their wrists with a crack and hold the sheet taut. This ironed out all the wrinkles when the sheets were still damp.

The sun would tell the women when it was noon. They would drop whatever they were doing and find a shady spot for their picnic. They would drink their chilled wine or cup their hands and drink the cold, clear river water.

It was one day when the women of our village were down at the river, that my mother's bedspread disappeared from our house.

"Irma, what happened to my bedspread? It is not on my bed." I had been with her all day, so she knew I didn't know. "Go out and call Ernest and Oreste. Tell your brothers to come home right now."

Children's voices were coming from the piazza. I ran to the square and called to my brothers. "Oreste. Ernest. Mama wants you home."

"Oh, what does she want? Are you sure she wants us? It isn't time to eat yet. Well, let's go, Ernest. I'll bet I can beat you home."

The boys ran off, leaving Irma far behind. I ran as fast as I could. I wanted to know what the boys had to say about the bedspread. Had they taken it to the mountains to make a tent? I didn't think so.

Mama questioned the boys about the bedspread. They were astonished that it was gone. Where could it have disappeared? The doors were never locked. Could someone have come into the house and stolen it? But who?

My mother's bedspread was reknowned. She was artistic and had intricately worked a beautiful design into the weave. Her colors were in beautiful, muted shades. Everyone had seen the bedspread when it was hung over the balcony for an airing.

"Oreste, go tell your Aunt Maria I want to see her."

"Do you think Aunt Maria took the bedspread?" asked Oreste.

"O, my, no! She was down at the river all day with me. I just want to talk to her. Now run and get her!"

Maria was my mother's sister, and the two of them were very close. Aunt Maria had a sixteen year old daughter, Bruna. The two of them came running into the house breathless.

"What is this Oreste has told us? Your bedspread is gone? But that's impossible. Where could it have gone? Do you think someone took it? Should we call the constable? What should we do?"

Aunt Maria was as distraught as my mother. It was a tragic loss. A bedspread usually lasted a lifetime. They were made of wool and required many sheep

The three women and three children sat down at the table to see what they should do. They had never known anyone who'd had a large article stolen.

"I can't think who in our village would have done this," said my mother starting to cry.

"Maybe it was that crazy woman from Sala. I saw her today. Come to think of it, she was carrying a large basket on her head." Oreste remembered seeing her around noon. They were sitting by the fountain with their friends. They had all seen her and remarked, "What is she doing in our village today? The women ar all washing clothes." They had forgotten about her, though, as soon as she had passed.

That had to be it. Ernest and Oreste ran up to get the constable. My mother felt relieved. She was sure the constabl would retrieve her proud possession.

"That woman should be put in jail." The jail next door to the church was seldom used. Alfredo was the only villager ever to use it, when he would be caught stealing chickens. This was bigger than chickens.

The boys came back. "The constable is coming."

They all sat at the table waiting patiently. "What's keeping him?" my mother asked. Ernest ran to look out the door.

"He is up a ways. He's talking to Mr. Rossi. O, here he comes now."

At last the constable was seated at our table. He amicably asked about our health. My mother set out wine, and wine glasses. With the formalities out of the way, my mother related how she hs discovered her loss.

"The boys saw who it was," my mother started to say. Ernest and Oreste both spoke out at once. "It was that crazy woman from Sala. We saw her carrying a basket on her head."

"Where did you see her?" inquired th constable.

"Ernest and I were sitting by the fountain with Pepino and Amatto. We saw her passing."

"That's all? You just saw her passi by?"

My mother could tell by the constabl question that it wasn't going to be as easy as she thought.

"You did not see her coming out of y house? You did not see her taking the bedspread?" The constable was looking at the boys with his questions. The bo were crushed. They thought they had be so much help.

"I'm sorry Signora, you have no pro

(continued)

Anyone could have taken your bedspread. I cannot go into every house looking for it. Perhaps something will come up. If you hear anything, let me know. If I hear anything, I'll do the same. Buon Giorno." With that, he was gone.

Aunt Maria spoke up. "We must think of a plan. Children, do not talk to anyone about the bedspread. Now, you three go out to play." Ernest, Oreste and I left the house.

And so the women mapped out their strategy. Aunt Maria and Bruna would go to Sala when the women of Sala were at their spot in the river, washing their clothes. They would spy on the suspicious woman's house and look for my mother's bedspread.

"I can't let you do this," protested my mother. "Why should you put yourselves in danger for me? I should go." But my aunt had decided, and her younger sister had to agree to the plan.

Sala was three miles away. The singing drifted over the mountains into our village when the women were washing their clothes. When my Aunt Maria heard it, she and Bruna started their walk to Sala. They went along the river, and when they came close to the singing, they hid behind heavy brush. They looked the women over and spotted the one they hoped to see.

The two women climbed the mountain to the small village. It looked deserted. The men were either farming their land or herding sheep. Everyone knew where the crazy woman lived. She still had goats in her basement. Everyone complained about it, but she would scream at anyone who would mention this to her, so people had stopped complaining about it, but they talked behind her back.

Hiding behind dwellings and always on the lookout for children, the two women crept closer and closer to their destination. At last they reached the house. The chickens were running wild.

The women were startled when a chicken came running out the door. The women were peeking from around the side of the house.

"I'm scared," Bruna whispered to her mother. Maria didn't want to admit it, but she wanted to turn and run back. She was just as frightened as Bruna. "Let's go now."

With that, the two women entered the house. It was in a terrible mess, unlike the clean houses of the women of Caramonico. They headed for the bedroom. It was not on the bed. They looked around. There was a chest in a corner. They raised the lid, and there it was! They had brought a sheet with them. They covered the bedspread with the sheet, both shaking as they did so. They closed the lid on the chest and crept out of the hous looking out first to see if anyone was coming. They took a shortcut down a crude road.

On the outskirts of our village, my mother was waiting for them with her basket. She was hoping that she would be carrying her bedspread home in it hidden on top of her head; she felt like a theif taking it home.

She saw Maria and Bruna at a distance. They were carrying something. She leapt up and ran to meet them, dragging the basket behind her. She let go of the basket and ran with open arms toward her sister and niece. The two women had been taking turns carrying the heavy, bulky bundle. They quickened their steps and started to laugh and cry in their joy. The three fell to the ground and cried. The sobbing mixed in with the breezes that were bringing the singing from the river. The women were still washing their clothes Then the singing stopped. The women of Sala were going home.

"We had better go home." Maria was exhausted from her adventure. "How can I ever repay you?" asked my mother.

"By not getting any more items stolen, said Maria. "From now on, we must lock our houses when we go down to the river. It's a shame there have to be such thieves around."

They all looked at each other and burst out laughing.

******

Irma Kump

THE BURSTING BEGINNING

Life has a precise
BEGINNING.
A sperm and an ovum
UNITE IN A BURST
And immediately
LIFE HAS BEGUN
In a woman's body.

So what is all the confusion about?
When is an embryo a fetus, a life?
It's so simple, but many refuse to see
That at the bursting beginning,
IT WAS ME!

******

Irma Kump

TATTLE TALE

I have wondered and wondered,
And pondered and pondered,
"When did it start?"
"Where did it begin?"
And it hit me one day out of the clear,
That it started as early as our kindergarten year.

"It's wrong to tattle"
"It's wrong to squeal"
It's wrong to turn in bullies and culprits who steal.
You must turn your eyes. You must shut your ears,
You didn't see what you saw,
Pay no attention to what you hear.
For worse than a bully and even worse than a thief,
Is someone who tattles, someone who speaks.

And so to adulthood the conditioning continues,
To be a stool pigeon is worse than the criminal.
If you see someone murdered, you turn the other way,
For if you scream out for justice,
They will put you away.

******

Irma Kump

OLD BROWNIE

She was sitting on my front stoop when I got home. As I approached her, she looked at me angrily and meowed in an old, irritable, cranky voice, as if to say, "What took you so long?" She was the ugliest cat that I had ever seen. Her once-long, brown and orange fur was matted down in clumps all over her body and there was a wild and frightened look in her eyes.

Stamping my foot and making a mean voice, I shooed her away. As she jumped off my stoop in a strange, disoriented way, I discovered that she had only three paws; a back paw was missing. I had never seen such a pitiful sight.

The next day the cat was on my doorstep again. My boys had to laugh when they saw her, so ugly in her matted, mangy fur, and her unbalanced, erratic movements. I asked my boys to go around the neighborhood and see if the cat belonged to someone; otherwise we would call the Humane Society. Much to my astonishment, the boys came home and informed me that the cat belonged to a couple who lived down the street. The couple worked all day, so that evening I called them and asked them to please come and pick up their cat.

The next day the cat was back again, and I was embarrassed to have her hanging around my front door. We kept calling her owners, but they didn't bother to come and pick her up, so we stopped calling them. We found out that the cat's back paw had been severed in a lawn mower accident.

Mercifully for us, the cat had now moved to our back stoop. She had discovered that she could look into our kitchen when we had our inside door open. After a while my boys started to refer to her as "Old Brownie," and Old Brownie's one aim in life was to get into our kitchen.

One day, in she darted. Before I could throw her out, she started purring so loudly with a rattling sound, that I squatted down to pet her. She swiftly jumped onto my lap, knocking me off my feet, and there I sat on the kitchen floor with Old Brownie on my lap. Purring loudly, she placed her front paw around my waist and snuggled close to me. For a moment she seemed content and at peace. When I tried to remove her paw, she dug her nails into my side, so I just sat there a moment, overcome with the poor cat's tenderness.

Well, I wasn't going to have her getting used to this treatment, so I quickly scooted her off my lap, against her angry protest, and threw her outside.

She was starting to become a permanent fixture. She simply would not leave. We ignored her. We threw out scraps once in a while, but never accepted her. We were not responsible for her.

Months went by, and winter found Old Brownie living in our basement window well. We had a severe winter, but we gave little thought to what she was enduring.

It was spring again and one morning our neighbor called to say that a pack of dogs was tearing the cat to bits. We got to the back door as the dogs were leaving. All we could see were bits and pieces of orange and brown fur.

The remorse I felt filled me for days. We all felt sad about how she had lived and died. All she ever wanted was a little pat and a kind word. Why had we not given it? How could I have been so cruel? What had I taught my sons by my indifference toward her? Now she was gone, and it was too late to be missing her and realizing how much she had meant to us. I cried for Old Brownie. I could not forgive myself. In the end, Old Brownie had won.

******

Sharon Odehnal

FUTURE WINTERS

Sometimes the winter wind chases me
Burrowing a december chill deep within my blood,
And snowflakes fall around me on a cold grey afternoon.

Friends,
Are they what they pretend to be?
Or are they like the snowflakes?
Giving the illusion of softness, like a warm white
blanket you depend on to keep you warm,
BUT DON'T GET TOO CLOSE,
they feel cold and quickly melt with warmth.
It's hard to see thru snowflakes there's so many!
Millions, clinging to you as tho a part of you,
BUT WHEN THE HEAT HITS, THEY'RE GONE.

Summer comes, snowflakes change to rain,

Still the same.

Flowers bloom, trees grow breezes warm and soft,
whistle thru the trees, birds sing in time to its
tune.
On days like this I feel lazy, I want to lie in
Tall grass under a tree and watch the birds fly
gracefully thru the sky.

The snowflakes are gone, rain still comes and goes
now and then.
AND YOU'RE STILL HERE!
You haven't turned cold and melted with heat.

Wi Winter suppressed your growth, the cold made you
uneasy.
You grow stronger with warmth.
We lasted through winter, we'll grow stronger this summer to help us thru

FUTURE WINTERS.

******

Judy Belfield

MELT/COUNT-DOWN

Shards of ice,
sheets of hardfrozen snow,
and fat, rust-colored icicles
are sliding down my roof.
From inside my house
I hear rumblings
like the morning cravings in a great god's belly.
I look outside
and see huge crystal chandeliers
shatter on the sidewalks,
the scattered pieces twinkling
in a blinding morning sunlight
that calls me out to play.
The hours of winter are numbered;
its clock is winding down
as the snow grows bald in patches on the ground
and here and there
some ochre hair appears --
sleeping grass quivers in the wind,
heavy with moisture
and matted in a tangle against the earth.
Ah -- mud --
the thick and sloppy sign of hope!
I want to sink to my ankles in mud;
plant myself in the waking turf and wait for spring.
Is it too soon to think of spring?
Will it come again the same way it did before?
No -- not the same:
the dandelions that flicker for a moment in my mind
bring butterchinned anticipation
and I do not remember gloom
in my decaying memory.
But it is too late to think of spring
for it has disappeared:
repetitions are illusions of sameness --
There are only new seasons
never before seen
and there is no time now for shadows.
The sunlight calls
and I am ready. ******

Sharon Odehnal

EARTH, AWAKE!

The earth is atremble with violent labor
shifting and shaking in uneven spasms of
passionate throes.
The earthworm emerges to escape her
caving cavern, Ants run rampant in a holocaust.
Crickets leap for land above , and Beetles
scurry and scatter to tall grass for safety.
The roots of the trees cling desparately
to their life-giving love, and their branches
quake and rise in timid submission to the sun.
The grass quivers and bows in lowliness in the
presence of the majestic wind.
Ah, and the wind, the ruler of earth.
She screams at the trees to bend before the
sky, she lashes the grass into passiveness.

(continued)

She swirls through the flowers to lift their
seeds; she sings in ecstasy as she lowers them
to earth, and she whispers the future to all.
The pulsating clouds split, and rain
pours to the ground pounding its way to the
very core of our being, beating the seeds the
wind had planted, into darkness.
And then,
Silence.
The trembling has ceased, the ants
and crickets seem sleeping, trees stand
unmoving, the grass raises his head once more
in pride, the ruler of the earth has hushed
her howls to little more than a murmur.
Wait. Listen!
The violent quaking, the shivering, the
writhing convulsions, the jolting and tossing
begins again, and the throbbing earth bursts
forth in an explosion ....
of SPRING!

******

Judy Belfield

A NICE PLACE TO VISIT

Fifty-four empty desks
rearranged only slightly since last I saw them
sit row by row
in an empty classroom
where dusky shadows creep silently
across the blackboards.
I move with the shadows
which take me through years
and I hear echoes:
Words as clearly in my ears now
as the day I first heard them --
"GOOD MORning SISter MIriam."
Sister Miriam had a nervous breakdown in October
because we were such bad kids --
the worst class the school had ever had.
Sister Miriam's 'nervous breakdown,'
we found out decades later,
was only a husband.
The smell of chalkdust
pinches somewhere in my nose
and I see myself clapping erasers together
out by the incinerator
in early November,
puffs of pungent powder rising,
stopping occasionally to slam an eraser
against the bricks of the school wall
leaving white patterns to be washed away with the next dawn.
Three flights of stairs --
gray marble worn down in the center of each step
from days and days of marching little feet --
down to the exit foyer.
I stop in the washroom where toilets and sinks are close to the floor
and the stalls still have
the dark-varnished, swinging, wood doors.
The walls are still the same cement blocks
painted the same slick, sick yellow
and decorated with smeared brown fingers in trailing comet designs.
Ready to go now, I pause to think how the school had stayed the same
yet changed so much.
I don't remember noticing the smell of chalk when I was seven, or nine, or eleven.
And then, the toilets weren't too low and the desks had plenty of room.
The halls were always full of children
not echoes of a single pair of shoes.
I hesitate to push the door and step out into the twilight present,
afraid I'll lose some carefully preserved parts of another me behind.

******

Sharon Odehnal

THEY

I used to dream of being a flower child with
a long, white flowing gown of love, and a basket
full of peace to give away to mankind.

Then I would have rainbow-colored skin and
flowers in my hair and I could hide underneath
it all and everyone loved me. Even me.

But THEY said, I couldn't do that, THEY said it
was silly, THEY said, "you have to be responsible
and dress and act in a reasonable manner."

But then I said, WHY? And THEY all ran away.

Now I'm a flower child.

******

Judy Belfield

SHALL I PAINT THE FOREST GREEN?

Shall I paint the forest green?
Sketch the leaves precisely,
draw in every vein and cell,
and color it veridian?
My brush,
so incompetent --
shall I raise it to a pristine canvas
and hope to touch god?

Shall I write the forest green?
Find the words in fingers
that have tried to pen before,
with enormous impotence,
and put those scribbles to paper
where they do not belong,
nor can they be contained?

Shall I feel the forest green?
Burst my already shattered mind
with thoughts incomprehensible,
while unnamed emotions stir so loudly,
they cannot be heard?

I think I shall not try --
maybe purple is better.

******

Sharon Odehnal

SUN TOUCHED BIRD

Oh, great flying Eagle
High above all,
The wind, she worships
Your echoing call.

Oh, the sun-touched bird
Flies to light,
But also she knows
The touch of night.

Oh, great golden lady
Lover of stars,
With wings that stretch
To Venus and Mars.

Oh, fly through my soul
Enlighten my heart,
Lift me in wings,
Which will never depart.

Oh, brilliant Eagle
Twinkling on high,
Take me in you
So I too may fly.

******

Judy Belfield

RANDOM THOUGHTS HASTILY SCRIBBLED WHILE HAVING BREAKFAST IN A RESTAURANT AND NOT BEING ABLE TO SEPARATE TODAY FROM YESTERDAY OR TOMORROW

He said,
"Jesus would not approve,"
and the birdietwitters flittered circularly,
following one another in the January ice-air.
I thought,
"One-hundred-twelve ways to say 'friend' would be nice,"
but abandoned the project:
one way is enough,
while the bullriding lady complained of aching arms
and drank coffee without cream.
John Deere on a hat --
John, Dear,
left at home with the video recorder playing "The Bad Seed"
while two beer-truck drivers talk about Doctor J
and some horse that lost a race.

(continued)

Random Thoughts, continued

"A little more coffee?"
she asks at every table
and I hear something sizzle on the grill,
while a refrigerator-case hums a monotonous tune,
and a blue-sweatered girl reads the Sun-Times under a cloud of smoke.
I think,
"Hiyo Silver,"
and hear horses' hooves from another time
and wonder why the cars outside can't be Appaloosas.
"A semblance of order --
some kind of cohesion,"
a voice nags in my head,
but I ignore it,
letting chaos reign supreme
because chaos has a perfect order all its own,
even though most people don't realize that flyaway hair
can be so attractively neat.
I ask myself,
"Is the Chicago Tribune vending box lonely as it stands chained to a steel post?
while people are leaving --
going wherever they go every day --
and I have stayed too long,
but I don't care
because I'm engrossed in nonsense --
and what's worse,
I'm writing it all down.
Thinking of a Candid Camera talking mailbox,
I see the time march by
in flickering little squares on a bank sign:
8:32
and peculiar characters
imitate thoughts
by arrogantly intimating:
"I am a word; I mean this -- or that."
But it's all subjective.
Should I choose to interpret L-O-A-N
to mean something other than what the English-speaking world accepts --
I will.
And L-O-A-N can be
"sunshine,"
or "Starry, Starry Night,"
which is playing now
over a Muzak-piping speaker.
I decided last night
that today would be great --
whether it was or not.
I decided I'd feel terrific --
whether that required a helpful drug or not
(which it hasn't so far),
and I decided
that Indians had a poetry I envy.
I wonder
how I can eat eggs
while reading about harp seals being bludgeoned --
but the blue earth turns all round, all around --
and who am I to break a circle?
I hear the whales
and understand --
The day is good:
It's the people that aint.

******

Sharon Odehnal

REVOLUTION

Sirens screamed their sharp accusations as
the lights thrashed the gathering crowds of
thrill seekers; flocks of vultures surrounding
the victim for a tempting feast, to pick clean
the bones one last time. Police radios shrieked
at the grim, grisly, gruesome acts of incurable
madness pulsating through the streets and
alleyways. Murder, rape, robbery, MURder,
disturbance at....wife beating, MURDER. HELP!
Help? Didn't anyone help? She lies face down
on the damp earth in a tide of blood and brains,
still warm, still flowing, still. Captain
Murray requests an ambulance at....STILL,
possible homocide...STILL, no identification
but is believed to be...STILL. HELP!
Did you hear a scream? Did you see anyone?
Any distinguishing features...a scar, tattoo?
No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, Noooo.
Does anyone know her? No. Can anyone identify
the body? No. Will you get involved? No.
Did you catch the murderer? No. Sirens screamed
their sharp accusations as....

*****

Judy Belfield

DO NOT THINK OF ME

Do not think of me
in the company of light
or in your busy hours,
for I am a creature of night,
too proud to be hastily remembered in a second
and forgotten the next.

Think of me
when dark and silent shadows
creep across your mind,
for I know those moments of sunless pain,
when moonlight causes agony,
despite its visual charm.
Think of me
when thinking is not possible --
but only feeling --
and there are no words
but only achings in the caverns of your soul,
for I have been there,
wedged between abysmal crags
and crying out for help,
only to find the vacant faces of strangers
and chameleon friends without hearts.
Think of me then --
for all the while I spent in myriad hells,
I did the honor
to think of you.

*****

Sharon Odehnal

SILENT SONG

It's not the music of her song I hear
Nor is it the pulling of a string,
But the throbbing of her heart is clear
And my own heart begins to sing.
The breath of her words shall fog my eyes
Till their mist rolls into my heart,
There I separate the words from sighs
For her feelings are tangled in art.

Her hands can not touch the ears of my soul
And her words shall fade on the paper,
Her painting upon my canvas is whole.
All else disappears into vapor.
It's now that I feel we shall sing our song,
For our hearts are throbbing sweet and long.

******

Judy Belfield

THANKS, DOC

When I was tired,
you gave me pep:
orange and yellow capsules
that sustained me for years.
But then I got hyper --
needed some calm,
and you gave me rest:
green and black ones this time,
that mellowed me out for awhile.
Every pain that ever ached --
from migraines in my head
to a throbbing in my big toe --
you had a cure for,
and you happily
wrote out prescriptions
I carried rapidly
to the pharmacist
who efficiently filled a bottle
with a much-appreciated medication
I couldn't swallow quickly enough.
But how many days have I lived on my own
in the past fifteen years?
How many days were mine alone,
not shared with pills that altered me?

And what is the cure for life?

******

Sharon Odehnal

THE KILLING

I wonder if Custer knew that his crime
Of killing the Indians one by one,
Would be carried out till the end of time
Never ending, by the sons of his son.
Nay, not in their death does this crime appear
But rather on the lips of men unwise,
Who act solely on emotions of fear
And scalp them all with the knives of their lies.

I wonder while Custer lies in his grave
Can he see the eyes of the innocent slain,
Or remember the flag of the valiant, young brave,
Does he hear the scream of the squaw in pain?
Damn you, Custer, wherever you lie,
Yes I damn you for those your sons made cry.

******

Sharon Odehnal

LET ME!

Let me be gum stuck on the wall
Or fade into the cracks,
To haunt always the grand ol hall
In moss-covered tracks.

Let me evaporate into thin air
And rise up to the lights,
Or sink into the tiled square
Observing forever the sights.

Let me become the curtains closing
Or footlights upon the stage,
Watching always the stars posing
From page, to stage, to age.

Let me appear a Butterfly passing
Or perhaps a first row chair,
To observe forever the careful casting
Of the leading pair.

Or, let me become the words of a song
Their breath sends forth to all,
For it's there that I belong
Hidden within that hall.

******

Judy Belfield

SHE WAS A PRINCESS WITH GOLDEN HAIR

She was a princess with golden hair
who sat all alone at the doorway of hell
watching the fires of long-dead desires
licking black bodies disfigured by sin.
She sat in the midnight archway glowing,
her tresses ablaze in the light --
frazzled cornsilk haloed,
rosebud lips, pouting pink
without intent to express a feeling
one way or no,
silver-blue eyes aglaze and empty
all alone,
not knowing pain,
while the vile spew of smoking bile
churled and churned at the edge of the ledge
and piercing screams of agony
curled about her ears,
which were plugged with cotton candy.
Sparklespangled dress of gossamer,
white and springcloud puffy,
billowed around her legs
as she sat on a blue velvet cushion,
hearing only the giggling of delicate bells
she created in her mind to pass the time.
Dark and deep behind,
the sulphurspume of foul decay
evilled up the choking air;
deathknowledge of all the ages past
played its cacophonous rhapsody
in the echochambers of infinity.
She sat with tiny satin-slippered feet
folded to the side
and dreamed dayfantasies of nothing in particular,
while she waited for the crystal coach
that would carry her away . . .
It never arrived.

****

Len Overcash

IRA HOWARD

I am the only person alive who remembers Ira Howard, but he was the greatest person I ever met. He was in his seventies when I used to visit him as a boy of twelve. He was thin and gaunt, with a wrinkled, rough-hewn face, soft eyes, and snow-colored hair, and I thought of him as a kind of God; a very old, very gentle god.

Ira's weatherbeaten porch was not just a porch, but a place where time was distorted. To step upon that porch was to pass through an invisible threshold into the past, and the squeaky, rusty porch swing was a time machine where Ira whirled and swirled and transported us to another era. I was favored of God to be able to share his life with him on that swing.

As I bounded up the warped steps on the hot evening of July 1, 1912, I detected an uncharacteristic tenseness about him. He sat stiff and motionless on the swing, staring oddly, fixedly, at the cornfield across the rutted dirt road. He hardly seemed to notice my presence when I sat down beside him, but he had something special to say to me that night. It was a confession so confidential that he never disclosed it to anyone else, not even his late wife.

After a few minutes of silence, he suddenly asked, "Do you know what night this is?"

"Yep. Monday!" I answered. I too scanned the field, hoping to find what it was that held his attention there.

"That's right," he said, "but it is something else, too." He paused. "Something that happened a long while back."

I thought for a moment but could find no answer. "I dunno," I said. "What?"

"I'll give you a hint. It happened forty-nine years ago."

"Tell me," I replied with all the impatience of youth.

He settled back, with a deep sigh, and set the swing in motion. "The forty-ninth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg," he said.

"Ain't that where Lincoln made his speech?"

"That's right."

"Did you see him?" I exclaimed, hoping that I had stumbled onto the answer to his strange riddle. "Was you there when he made his speech?"

"No," he answered slowly. "But I fought in the battle the first day."

"You never told me about that one," I said. I felt as though I was being deliberately excluded from his confidence. Our times together were usually cordial and easy. There was a bond of trust between us and we spoke to each other freely. But on this night, a wall separated us, a velied mystery he had been reluctant to reveal even to me.

"Seems that I haven't," he said.

"Why not?"

"There are things a man does that he feels he must keep hidden from others. A secret he cannot share. Do you understand what I mean?"

I shrugged. He was an honest, proud man, and he never thought of himself as a hero, though he had won promotions for gallantry during the war. He never glamorized the stories he told me with descriptions of the violence and bloodshed. It wasn't until I was much older, and had seen the prints of Brady's daguerreotypes that I realized the extent of the carnage and slaughter of the battles he participated in.

"It has been plaguing my mind for a time now," he continued, "and I guess it's the right time to talk about it. You're still young enough that you will soon forget what I am about to tell you. Besides," he said, placing a large, calloused hand on my leg, "we're best friends, aren't we?"

I nodded. With that statement, all my anger and resentment dissipated. We assumed our usual positions and he began his narrative.

"Gettysburg was a tidy little town, set on an open rolling plain, nestled among the blue-colored mountains that surrounded it. Not much to it, but it was a neat and prosperous town.

"We rode into the town on the afternoon of the thirtieth of June, the day before the real battle started, looking for rebel troops. We were ordered to find out what Lee was doing, and where he was, but not to do any fighting, since our infantry was still ten miles away.

"It was a hot, steamy day, and the dust roiled in huge clouds as we rode north. Just as we entered the town itself, we saw the flags of the Confederate regiments on the ridges on the western edge of Gettysburg. There weren't many of them, but enough to make us stop and think about it for a few minutes before we continued. We sat on our horses a while, waiting for General Buford to decide whether or not to pull back.

"Suddenly, before the officers could make up their minds, the Confederates began to withdraw. They left slowly toward the west, toward the mountain pass in the distance. Shortly, we rode through the down, and out the narrow dirt road behind them.

"When we had gone about a mile out of town we were ordered to make camp.

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Ira Howard, continued

Buford strung us out in a long arch, that stretched clear to the north of Gettysburg. My brigade, the 8th Illinois, stayed on a low, wooded ridge, called McPhearson's Ridge, just behind a little stream named Willoughby Run.

"We was thankful for being so close to water because, after riding all afternoon, our throats were dry like deserts. Everybody slipped down there for a drink, or to wash some of the grit off their faces. It was almost like a picnic, it was so quiet and such pretty and peaceful country, but we all knew it couldn't last long. We watched the fields of wheat and grain that lay in front of us. At any moment we expected to see a Rebel skirmish line advancing to test our strength.

"Usually when we made camp, we finished the necessary chores as quickly as we could, so we could have some time to gamble, or play cards, or spread false rumors, but not that night. We tried to settle down, but the whole brigade sensed something peculiar in the air. It was as though the darkness was only a mantle to cover something bizarre, something extraordinary, which would be revealed with the coming of dawn.

"Everybody cleaned and oiled his weapon, keeping quiet and to himself. I guess the troopers were getting things in order; writing letters home, or praying silently, and wondering if they would be alive this same hour on the next day. Mostly, one avoided thinking about that happening, but this night had a unique, distinctive mark from all the others. When I got tired of it all, I went to bed.

"The sergeant came by before dawn and woke me and ordered me out on sentry duty. He told me to be especially watchful, that General Buford expected the enemy to engage us in full force at first light, and I was to fire a few warning shots when I saw their pickets advancing to alert our troops in enough time to prepare to repel them.

"I got up and went to relieve the other guard. I was reluctant to go, I knew as well as any soldier in that camp that the Rebels were going to attack us, but when the sergeant said it a penetrating chill had soaked through me. But I went because it was my duty to go; I could not disobey my orders. I started thinking ahead to what might happen when the sun rose. Thoughts like those are deadly to a soldier because they make him worry about things that are best left to God's will, but I could not stop thinking that way. I was overcome with a haunting sense of foreboding.

"I prayed that the sun would not send its light over the mountains around me. All those horrible thoughts made my mouth go dry, as I disobeyed orders and left my post. I worked my way down to the creek, cautiously, peering into the night, but I could see nothing. I leaned my rifle against a nearby tree and knelt down by the stream, cupping my hands and filling them with cold, clean water. I was just taking the first swallow when I heard a rifle cock.

"The Rebel must have seen me coming and waited for the right moment. I was without a weapon -- my rifle lay a few feet away, where I had left it, and my pistol was still under my saddle, where I had forgotten it. All I had was my knife, sheathed and hidden in my right boot.

"I surveyed the woods without moving, and I spotted him directly acorss the creek. He was well hidden in the still dark shadows of the forest. With one hand, he motioned for me to come across the creek, and I did, slowly, and stopped a few feet from him. Though it was still dark, I could see that he was dressed as most of the Rebels we captured that year; like a tattered soiled scarecrow. I could make out nothing of his face beneath his brimmed hat, except a slight flickering of his eyes.

"He stepped aside, pointing west toward his army, and I was totally overcome with fear. My mind was flooded with thoughts of the grisly horrid rumors I had heard about the quality of life in the prison camps: How food was so scarce that men murdered for it; and when one died, he was buried and forgotten, and no one cared. It doesn't take a lot of thought along those lines for a man to conclude that he might be better off dead than in a place like Libby Prison.

"But I had done too much thinking that night, with not enough concentration on being a soldier. I had made a dangerous and stupid mistake, and as a result had been taken prisoner by the enemy. So, as we wound our way through the woods and speargrass, I tried to keep my mind a complete blank.

"I suppose I could have yelled, or done something to alert our pickets, but that would not have brought about my rescue, only my death. I knew that the Rebel's General would want to interrogate me for information, and, because of that, I knew the Rebel would try to keep me alive. That, and my knife, were the only hopes I had.

"The sun was just sending out its first rays when we came to a long, low rock wall separating two fields. As I threw my left leg across the wall, the Reb spotted my new boots. 'I sherely do like them boots, Yank,' he said.

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"He was admiring them lustily, for, despite the mud and water stains form crossing the creek, they were a real fine pair of boots. And they gave me an idea, though I truly knew it wouldn't work.

"'Reb," I said to him, 'I'll give ya these here boots and twenty dollars in greenbacks if you'll turn me loose.'

"'You tryin' to be funny' he asked me, toying with his rifle.

"'No,' I said, 'I mean it.'

"'I'll git them boots and them there greenbacks and anythin' else you got when I'm ready for 'em, so you jest hop over that wall . and keep agoin'.'

"Up till then, I guess, I must have thought the whole ordeal was only a bad dream, one where I would wake up screaming. But after speaking to him, I realized that there would be no waking up from this one. I was headed for a prison camp in the South. I had to stall him somehow, and hope to find a way out of the mess.

"'Reb,' I said, looking at him boldly. 'I don't figger on dyin in no prison camp. If I am to die in this war, I want to die in battle.' Then I swung my left leg back over the wall and just sat there. 'I aint going no further,' I said.

"He didn't say anything for a minute, he just looked at me. Then he said, 'You must be crazy.'

"'No,' I said. 'Shoot me here or let me go. Take my boots or my money right now if you want them.'

"'I can't do that, Yank,' he answered. 'I won't shoot an unarmed prisoner, but General Heath will want to talk to you, so you can't go neither.'

"'I'm goin to die either way,' I said, standing up.

"'Our boys die up North too,' he said, pointing his rifle at my chest. 'Troops'll be moving up soon, so we'll just wait for 'em.'

"He had me trapped, we both knew that much, and all he had to do was outlast me. He stayed too far away for me to even reach for the knife, so I sat back down, wondering if I should run and take my chances. But I decided that would be the same as committing suicide.

"We eyed each other warily, shifting about nervously for several minutes. Then, carrying distinctly on the clear, hot morning air, came the unmistakable sounds of troops forming. As General Buford had predicted, the Confederates were coming with the first light of dawn, looking for a fight.

"The Reb glanced at the sky, which was now reddening as the sun crawled above the saw-toothed mountains to the east.

"'Hope there's plenty a you blue-bellies over yonder, 'cause it sounds like our boys're on the way.'

"The darkness was retreating rapidly by this point and I saw his face for the first time. His voice was as deep as my own, but he was not nearly my age. He was probably still in his teens, but had reached a man's size, despite the scanty rations of their army.

"His eyes are what I remember best. They were much older than the rest of him. He had seen too many scenes of violence and bloodshed for a boy his age.

"He kept glancing around uneasily, watching me and looking toward his own lines.

"All of a sudden he said, 'Let's have them boots, Yank.'

"I jerked the left boot off and held it out to him. His eyes lit up when he saw how they were made.

"Then a rifle spoke out sharply, and was followed by four or five quick reports. We looked toward the north, where the sounds had come from. 'Reckon it's a-startin',' he said.

"Then, in his excitement, he made his fatal mistake. He leaned his rifle against the stone wall to use both hands to force his foot into the boot. He was so busy stamping and tugging at the boot that he paid little attention to me. So, as I pulled off the right boot, I slid the knife out and hid it up my sleeve.

"I could have used a rock from the wall, or just hit him with my fist, but he was close to the rifle and he might have been able to get to it and shoot me. Waiting to decide meant forboding future in Libby Prison.

"So, while he was hunched over, wrestling with the boot, I stabbed him with my knife.

"He didn't scream or cry out. He grunted and sank to his knees, holding himself upright by clutching the wall with one hand.

"I stood there staring stupidly at the spreading stain on his chest, and shaking as though I were freezing cold. Then, still holding the bloody knife, I started blubbering, trying to tell him how sorry I was, and how I was just so scared and all. He didn't answer, but closed his eyes, and when I saw his lips moving I knew he was praying.

"I ran then. I made it back to my own lines, and fought in my socks all day. I can't remember much about the battle itself that day, except that we fought until nearly eleven o'clock that morning before we were finally relieved. Then we were called back again that afternoon, after our troops were routed and the Confederates were about to take possession of the town itself.

"The fighting was severe that day and I didn't have time to dwell on my

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thoughts, but it all caught up with me that night. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that with such heavy losses, he might have been killed anyway, but I knew it was closer to murder. It was not the same as being on the line, shooting at, and being shot at by, from many yards away. Then it was a matter of fate.

"I was no different from so many others that fought in the Civil War. I only wanted to survive the fighting and get back to my family. But I cannot use that desire to excuse myself for doing such an evil thing. Since that day, I have often wondered about that young Rebel; wondered who he was and what sort of life I had kept him from."

The swing stopped its rocking and the sound of chirping crickets floated over the porch on the cooling breeze. We had returned to the present.

Ira had laid bare a part of himself to me that no other living being had ever known. For the first time in my short life my impatience lay dormant as I understood what a profound confession I had heard. He stayed silent, and I kept that silence, for it would have been unholy to break it.

After a long, rigid pause, he relaxed and set the swing in motion again. "I never answered anybody when they asked why I didn't have my shoes on," he said. "I never even told Irene in all the years we were married. I told you because you are young and will soon forget...and I <u>had</u> to tell someone."

He held his right hand before his face and looked at it as if it were not a part of his body, then he let it drop back in his lap, and said, "I vowed to return to that stone wall after the battle and bury the Rebel. I hoped I might be able to find a letter or something with his home address on it so I could write his family a letter -- to tell them what had happened, and ask them to forgive me for doing such a cowardly thing. But we were ordered into Maryland the next morning and I never got back to Gettysburg."

"Next year is the fiftieth anniversary of that day, and I have saved enough money to take the train to Pennsylvania," he said. "I'm going to go back and try to find that stone wall..."

He stopped talking, sighed deeply and massaged his temples with his fingeetips. "It's getting very dark," he said, "you best be gittin home, before your mother starts to fret." Then he leaned over and hugged me. "You forget these ramblings of an old man, okay?"

"Okay," I told him.

But I never forgot him, or the story he told me that evening. He died that winter, a few days before Christmas, and didn't get to return to Gettysburg.

I am old now, with grandchildren and my own porch swing. I sit with them now, in that swing, and try to imbue them with the same kind of wisdom Ira Howard passed along to me. But on the first day of July each year, I sit there alone and stir my memory, giving life again to a nearly forgotten brave man.

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MAGGIE PETERSON 3.8